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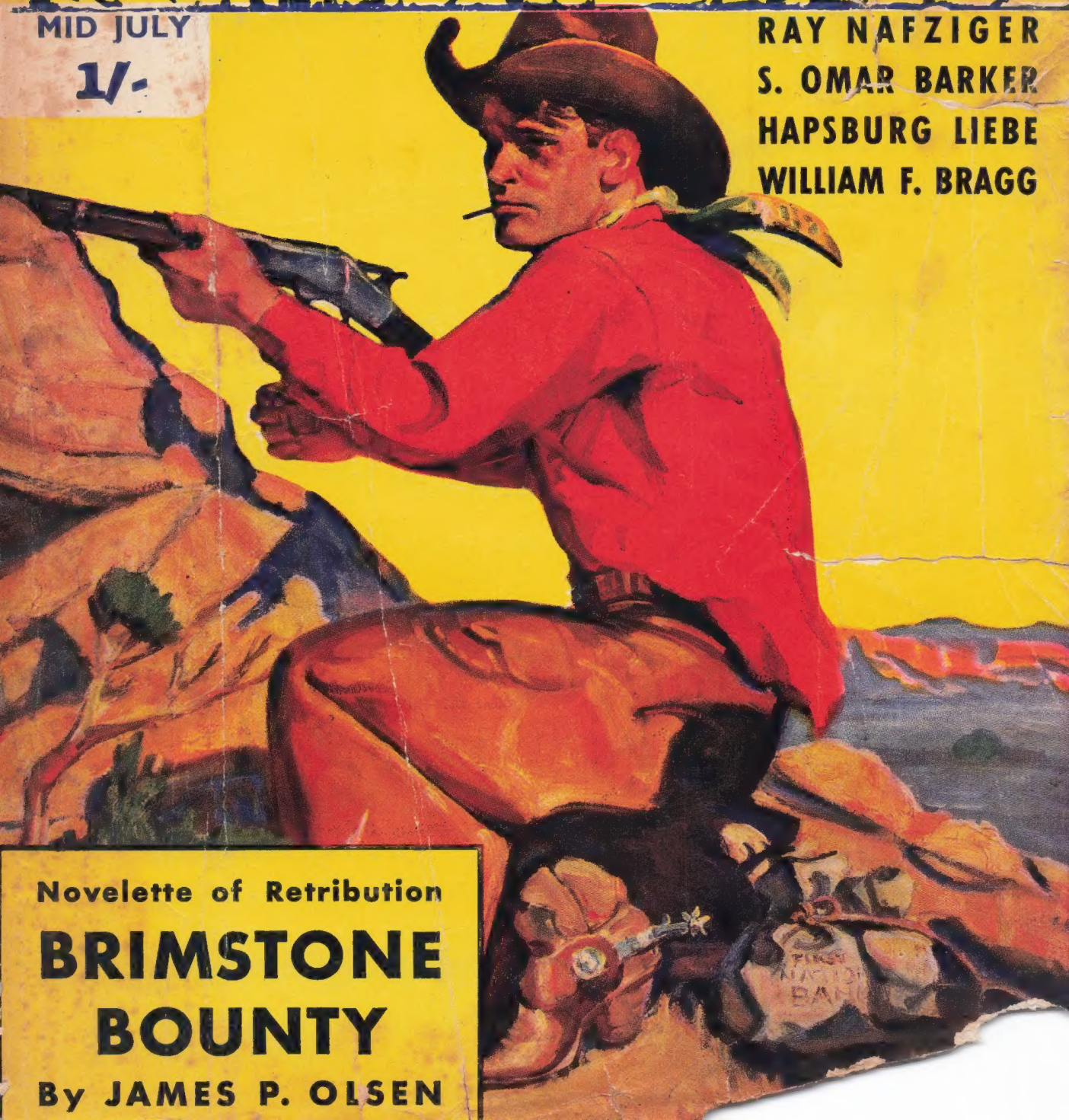

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DEATH WATCH

by William F. Bragg

Pat Kirby, alone, believed that the Bitter Root Kid was not a bushwhack killer—and Pat was the man chosen to keep his friend from cheating the gallows!

PAT KIRBY led the three-man posse that stormed up to the droop-headed pony standing in the middle of Spanish Basin. Checking his gray mount ten jumps away, Pat stood up in his stirrups, inspected the scene of rangeland tragedy exposed to his view. A man lay on the ground with sightless eyes staring up at the blue sky, his faithful pony still staying with him. The sight of that horse had attracted a wandering cowpoke some time ago and sent him galloping into Blazed Butte five miles distant with word that Dave Hines had been dry-gulched.

A fast-moving mystery of the North-west rangeland

Grimly Pat kept firing while Laskia rode in for the death shot!

"It's Dave all right," muttered Pat, as his two companions spurred to his side.

They sat there an instant, eyes mere slits of icy light behind narrowed lids. Dave Hines, a part owner of the prosperous Slash Four cattle outfit, had been a popular man in Blazed Butte County. Not a man there but counted Dave as his friend.

And now, while buzzards circled above, they halted their ponies some distance from Dave's body in order to read the ground for sign before making a nearer approach.

Ben Laskia, second rider of the posse, a slim, dark man with sloe-black eyes who followed the trade of cattle buyer, made the first discovery. Tracing the dim prints of horse tracks that circled the murdered man, he found signs of a trail leading toward a clump of buffalo berry brush fifty yards south on the crest of the long slope that slanted down into Spanish Creek Canyon.

"It looks," he said to his mates, "as though the killer had waited in that brush for Dave. After he shot him, he got on his pony, rode over slow

and keerful, circled the body to make shore Dave was dead, then drifted off toward the canyon."

"We got to catch that killer," Pat growled.

Hank Lard, the tall, hatchet-faced cowpoke who had discovered the body, asked. "Why would anybody kill Dave?"

Laskia, now dismounted, answered: "We'll know more about that after we read the sign." He motioned to the buffalo berry brush. "Ride over, Hank. See if you can find anything where the killer hid."

Hank Lard swung his pony, jogged toward the dark clump of brush.

Kirby swung down, followed Laskia to where Dave lay. He towered grimly above Ben as the latter knelt and opened the dead man's sodden shirt.

Ben looked up. "Here's why Dave was killed," he explained, a cold smile on his thin lips. "When he left town, Dave was wearin' a money belt with two thousand dollars in it. The belt's gone."

Pat Kirby's gray eyes flashed as he stared down at Ben.

"How," he rapped out, "do you know Dave was packin' that much money?"

"Because," Ben said, "not three hours ago, I bought fifty head of fat cattle from him and paid forty dollars a head. I saw him put the bills in the belt. Even saw him pull up his shirt to git at the leather. That's how I know."

"Forty Dollars is low for fat cattle. They're wuth double that."

Laskia arose, a sneer on his dark face. "What we out here for?" he growled. "To argue cattle prices? This was a special deal between me an' Dave. I'm tellin' you again that he was packin' money when he rode outa town. And it ain't here now."

Pat grunted and stalked around the pony that had carried the dead man. It was a rangy bay with a bright eye and trim build. The saddle, cinched on its back, had once been gay and expensive-looking as befitted the partner of the Slash Four. But now the hull was painted red as with barn paint. And there were straggling lines of the same color on the broad stirrup leathers. Kirby, head bent as though he were reading a book, picked up other sign that indicated a desperate attempt by Dave to fight off his assailant. He saw the victim had cleared a six-gun, that the weapon was still gripped in his stiff right hand.

"Dave didn't die right off," he told Laskia. "Take away the gun an' look."

The cylinder revealed that Dave had lived long enough to fire three shots. He had died rather slowly then, taken perhaps a quarter hour to succumb to the bullet that ripped into his back and bored a hole through his body.

Kirby felt his wrath arise like the flare-up of a forest fire. Brutal murder for a few hundred dollars. Torture inflicted on a man who had never harmed any rider of the Blazed Butte range. If the law ran down the killer, Kirby reflected, mob spirit would run riot.

AS he settled down beside Ben to examine Dave's gun, the two special officers appeared the best of comrades. But there was a bar between them.

Laskia, who followed the interests of big beef outfits like the Slash Four, was the henchman of Sand Hill Krane, Dave Hines' partner in the spread, a roaring, red-faced tyrant, the opposite in temper and bearing of this quiet little man who lay so limply on the buffalo grass.

Pat Kirby owned a small ranch and a bunch of cattle. Other men of similar station regarded him as their leader when rich outfits like the Slash Four attempted to bully them off the range.

Also there was a girl in Blazed Butte, slimly-built, and endowed with soft brown hair that shimmered under the Wyoming sunlight, and clear blue eyes. She was the sheriff's daughter, Peggy, and she had interfered seriously with the lives of Pat Kirby and Ben Laskia. Because of Peggy, they had been the first to join the posse, head for the murder scene. Both believed that the man who brought in the killer would stand ace-high with the girl.

And tomorrow, Blazed Butte would elect a sheriff. Sand Hill Krane opposed Peggy's father on the platform of less law and more six-gun order on the range.

"This killin'," Pat declared, "won't help out the sheriff none with the voters unless we find the skunk that did it. When Sand Hill hears his partner's been beefed and Slash Four money stole, he'll yowl like a bobcat with its tail in a trap."

Laskia nodded. "Not much to go on," he mused. "Dim horse and boot tracks. Probably an empty carbine shell or so over in that brush. Some common caliber that fifty men tote on this range. Thing to do then is look over the hombres who might have pulled this. Who had some motive."

"Who do you suggest?"

Laskia grinned wickedly. "Well," he drawled, "how about your young friend, the Bitter Root Kid? He lives down in the canyon in Hoodoo Cabin. Not far away. He has a motive."

Kirby's lean face reddened with anger. "The Kid," he declared, "ain't got no motive even if he did go with the wild bunch a few years ago."

"No!" Laskia said. "Wasn't he rustlin' Slash Four cattle when they caught him an' his pardner, Jaybird Brogan? The Kid was so young he got off with three years in the pen. But they hung Jaybird from the ridgepole of the cabin. That same cabin the Kid's livin' in now."

"Yeah—" Pat cut in. "Hoodoo Cabin. Livin' there like a wounded wolf because when he come back, Sand Hill Krane put him on the roundup blacklist. The Kid couldn't git a decent job. He's made a few dollars here and there—"

"From softies like you and the sheriff."

Both men had arisen as their talk waxed hot. They faced each other, hands poised above sagging gunbelts. All the enmity that had arisen between them over the courtship of Peggy Gale, now flamed with the Bitter Root Kid as the spoken excuse.

"You forget," rasped Pat Kirby, "that the Bitter Root Kid once saved my life. We was breakin' hosses in the days when the Kid was straight. A bronk tangled me up. My boot got caught in the stirrup. I was hung up right. And figured any minute that bronk would kick in my head. The Kid eared down that damned hoss. He mighta been killed hisself. No," Pat's voice rose harshly and he stepped nearer Laskia until, if they had gone for guns, bullets would have crossed only twelve inches to drill into flesh and bone. "No— The Kid has his failings when it comes to other folk's cattle. But never in his life would he shoot a man through the back. He's too damned game—"

Laskia, just as courageous as Pat, stuck out his blue-black jaw like a saddle-horn, glared unwinkingly into Pat's face, snarled from the corner of his twisted mouth.

"You yourself have lined up the best motive on earth for this killin'. The Kid's desire for revenge on the Slash Four that had hung his partner, sent him to the pen, then barred him from work when he got out."

Laskia whirled on his peg-heeled boots, stalked toward his pony.

"Come on," he taunted. "Yo're friend enough of the sheriff to at least ride down and see the Kid."

Pat nodded shortly. "And I know," he growled, "that he'll call you a

bench-legged liar and mebbe kill you if you accuse him of dry gulchin' Dave Hines."

"I'll take that chance!" Laskia snapped back.

THEY sent Hank Lard to stand guard over the murder spot. Then they picked up a horse trail that led down the slope from the buffalo brush into the winding valley of Spanish Creek. Here the timber grew far down on tongues of land. There were vast outcroppings of granite rock and it was an ideal spot for hiding cattle and calves until roundups passed, then working over brands in concealed corrals.

Here had been the stamping ground of Jaybird and young Bitter Root until Sand Hill Krane and his men ran them down, hung Jaybird from the end of the ridgepole that protruded from the roof of his own cabin, and sent the Kid away to stay behind iron bars for three years. No man had lived in the cabin while the boy was doing time. They called it unlucky because a man had been hanged there. They named it Hoodoo Cabin.

But the Kid, baffled and despairing because he could not find work upon his return, had lived there. He could not afford a better place than this ramshackle hut, which in three years of emptiness, had been buffeted by blizzard winds, burned by summer suns, even struck by lightning. It had become the home of owls and packrats until the Bitter Root Kid, with the penitentiary pallor on his smooth young face, came back.

As Pat and Ben swung down through the small horse pasture above the creek, they could see the cabin almost hidden by brush along the stream. The single window in front had been stuffed with sacks to keep out the wind for all the panes had long since been shattered.

An antelope bounded away as they trotted through the meadow, crashed into a grove of choke-cherries. Out trotted a startled horse.

Laskia snapped. "See that? Mark of a wet blanket on that pony's back."

They rode over. The horse moved away a few paces and Pat saw that it walked clumsily. His sharp eyes informed him of the reason. The shoes had but recently been ripped off the animal's front hoofs.

Laskia laughed. "Now," he jeered, "what do you think of yore life-savin' friend, The Bitter Root Kid?" He pointed to the white marks where nails had been pulled from the horse's hoofs. "Don't forget the killer rode a shod horse. He knew that a horse trail would mebbe be our best clue, that mebbe we'd figure out the style of shoe on his pony. So what does he do? He hides the horse and jerks the shoes. Throws 'em away, in the creek, most likely."

"I'll need better evidence than this," Pat said doggedly, "to believe Bitter Root shot Dave through the back."

They rode down to the cabin, dismounted, walked to the door. Pat rapped once then waited. It wasn't until he pounded heavily on the stout wood that he heard a sleepy voice that bade him enter.

He opened the door, stalked in, closely followed by Laskia.

The Kid sat on the edge of his bunk in the rear of the cabin. His blond hair looked frowsy. His eyes were red-rimmed as though he had slept. But his young face, smooth-looking in spite of the deep lines engraved between his long nose and straight mouth, lit up with a smile as he saw Pat. He jumped up.

"Pat!" he cried. "Sit down. I'll stir up the fire. Boil some coffee."

Pat shook his head. He gestured toward Laskia who was standing near the door, curiously inspecting the cabin with its spare equipment of packing-case furniture, rusty old stove, and sack-stuffed window.

"Ben here," he said, "wanted to ask you why you pulled the front shoes off yore pinto horse."

"Pulled the shoes off?" the Kid asked wonderingly. "Why I just shod that pony a couple weeks ago. Why should I pull 'em off?"

Laskia snarled. "You may not know it, but Dave Hines was ambushed and robbed of his moneybelt up on the divide not long ago. A horse trail led down here. We found yore horse with the shoes pulled. What about it?"

The Kid leaped toward Laskia, reaching for a rifle that hung on a staghorn rack by the door.

"Call me a killer!" he ripped out.

But Pat jumped between the angry boy and Laskia.

"Keep cool," he cautioned. "Laskia's tellin' the truth about that horse an' the killin' of Dave. Not that I believe you did it, Kid. They'll have to prove it up to the hilt. But to clear things up, tell me where you spent most of the day."

"I come in at noon," said the Kid. "There was some coffee in the pot. I warmed it up. Drank it and ate some sourdough bread. I had been ridin' hard all mornin'. I felt danged sleepy after I ate. Laid down on my bunk. Never opened an eye until you knocked on the door."

Laskia said harshly, black eyes hard on the boy. "No witnesses to prove your alibi."

"Don't need none!" Bitter Root declared hotly. "Laskia, you and Sand Hill Krane would laugh like hell to git me hung. You hung my pardner—"

"He deserved it. And so do you—"

Laskia swung around, gestured toward the window.

"I remember," he said, "how we rode up that night when we trapped you and Jaybird. You had glass in this window then. Not sacks—" he jerked one of the burlap bundles that had been stuffed into the broken window.

Something fell from the sack, struck the floor, unrolled. It was a leather moneybelt.

Pat Kirby stood like a frozen man, gray eyes lined like rifles on that belt which but a few hours ago had encircled the waist of Dave Hines.

The Bitter Root Kid crouched like an animal at bay, sharp blue eyes peering wildly through the tangle of blond hair that half hid his face.

"I thought so," Ben Laskia said with a dry laugh, and bent to pick up the belt.

With a yell, the Kid tore his rifle off the rack, fired before it had struck firmly against his shoulder. Only the crash of Pat Kirby's shoulder against him, saved the boy there and then from a charge of first degree murder. The bullet smashed into the dirt floor between Laskia's boots.

With a snarl, the beef buyer raked his six-gun, would have dropped Bitter Root in his tracks.

But he found himself covered by Pat Kirby's long Colt, heard the lean cattleman shout. "Hands off yore iron, Laskia! And—fast! This man—" Kirby was speaking swiftly, fighting to avoid killing Ben Laskia "this man here is my prisoner."

CHAPTER II
A Mob Gathers

THE Bitter Root Kid clung to the steel grillwork of the center cell in the Blazed Butte jail. He had been there an hour, long enough to wash the grime off his face and hands, comb his hair, eat a light snack that the Chink had carried in from the cafe across the street.

In the dimly-lit corridor, bolt upright in his chair, Pat Kirby sat, with a Winchester resting across his knees. Ben Laskia, long before, had gone storming forth to notify Sand Hill Krane and his cohorts that the Hines murderer was in the calaboose.

Kirby sat here as much to protect the Bitter Root Kid from mob violence as to prevent him from attempting an escape. Carefully the boy had been searched and even his pocket knife put in the front office. His rifle and gunbelts had been placed there also, in the arms rack, for safekeeping.

"Nice pinch, Pat," the Kid drawled coldly, hard eyes on his friend who now sat guarding him with a special officer's badge pinned to his faded vest. "You got me in the coop. And I reckon you know what they're doin' in all the saloons along the main stem."

Pat nodded. For the past hour, cowpunchers had thundered into town on lathered horses, thrown their hackamore leads over saloon hitch-racks, trailed their spurs through batwing doors and up to the mahogany, there to stoke up their courage with raw whiskey. Word of the cold murder had spread like the ripples of a rock thrown into a quiet pool. Red ran the rage of Blazed Butte. The lack of a leader alone held back that mob from launching an attack against the jail.

The Blazed Butte calaboose, Pat Kirby knew, would not long resist a determined attack. It was the rebuilt remains of an old military stockade erected here when troopers were chasing Sioux and Cheyenne war whoops up and down the Powder River Valley. The log walls had loosened, adobe plaster had fallen away, the hinges had rusted on the doors. Even the bars of the cell windows were of soft iron and loose in their sockets from the hard winter frosts that always gripped this northwest range.

But here and there in Blazed Butte were quiet men who had received a tip from Old Sheriff Gale, and had immediately cleaned the barrels of shotguns and buffalo rifles. They had laid out brass shells loaded with buckshot, counted out the finger-long paper-patched cartridges for the Sharps that would knock down a buffalo bull at five hundred yards and then knock down a jackrabbit if it happened to be on the opposite side of the bull.

On living walls of men, on men like Pat Kirby, Sheriff Gale counted on defending the Bitter Root Kid from lawless vengeance. For the Kid had sworn bitterly, upon arrival at the jail, that he had been framed, that his horse had been stolen while he slept, that the killer had hidden the moneybelt in his cabin.

Dave Hines had been slowly brought to town in a roundup wagon, his faithful horse trotting behind. Dave was now in the office of Judge Snapp, coroner, awaiting an inquest. His horse and saddle had been placed in the sheriff's barn behind the jail. His garments and other belongings were in the sheriff's office.

And Ben Laskia, stamping angrily from the jail to send hot word to Sand Hill Krane, had sworn that the case was all cleaned up and that only a long rope was now required.

On the events of the next few hours depended not only the life of the Bitter Root Kid but the official fate of Sheriff Luke. If he cleared up this case, he would win hands down. If he failed—by the smallest mistake—Sand Hill Krane would be swept into office with his slogan of "less *law* and more six-gun order."

AFTER his first burst of rage, Bitter Root had cooled down until only the deep red gleam of his narrowed eyes indicated the rage he kept in leash. Although Pat Kirby had defended him from Ben Laskia, then prevented him in return from murdering the cattle buyer, the Kid wasn't thinking of this. He was like a caged wolf, alone against the world, certain that every man's hand was against him, even that of Pat Kirby.

For here sat Pat, his friend, on guard—a death watch!

The Kid resorted to clever argument. "Pat," he drawled, "you won't let 'em hang me. You ain't forgettin' that you and me were once old round-up friends. You ain't forgettin' that, Pat?"

Pat's gaunt face drooped. No, he wasn't forgetting that nor the dread day that a gallant boy, this same jailbird, saved him from the iron hoofs of an outlaw horse.

"Listen, Pat," the Kid droned on. "I wouldn't shoot a man like Dave through the back. I'm swearin' they framed me. Funny how hard I slept after eatin'. Don't often do that—"

"You think they doped you?"

"Don't know. But mighta been somethin' slipped into the coffee pot while I was out on the range. It was half full. They figured I wouldn't throw it out and make fresh. Not a poor man, Pat," and the Kid smiled bitterly. "A poor man keeps boilin' the grounds."

Kirby stood up, adjusted the wick of the coal oil lamp. He hated to look through the bars at the Kid, hated to see this gallant but reckless boy caged up. It tore at Pat's heart. But he knew well enough that the boy was more secure here than free on the range. For out there, led by Laskia and Krane, Slash Four punchers might hang him from the same ridgepole that his rustler friend, Jaybird, had once adorned.

The Kid whispered. "Pat—for old times' sake—give me a break. Let me git out and find who's framin' me. Open the cell, Pat. I'll tie you up. You can swear that I pretended sick, that you come in like a friend, and I jumped you. Took away yore gun and so forth. You got nuthin' to lose, Pat, but a little reputation. You can stand losin' *that* for a friend."

The plea moved Pat strongly. This was the sagebrush country, far from civilization. The friendship and trust of men counted for more on the frontier, for in hard country, men were forced to depend on each other against the savage perils of nature, the cattle camps, the roaring life of the towns.

"But the sheriff?" he asked. "You'd hurt his chances of bein' re-elected if you drifted."

The Kid's blue eyes opened widely and his face looked pale as death as he pressed it pleadingly against the bars.

"Pat," he said, "this jail won't keep out a mob. Ain't my life sweeter to me than a damned star to an old billy-goat John Law? Pat—are you so sweet on that girl that you've forgot yore old friend? A man who saved yore life? Pat—" he rattled the bars savagely, "I'm givin' you a last chance to come through. If you don't—"

His words trailed off. For the door that led into the front office opened.

In stalked Sheriff Gale, thin as a rail, hawk-faced, grizzled of whiskers and hair. And behind the sheriff walked slim Peggy. She carried a tray and as she walked past Kirby she flashed a smile.

But he couldn't meet her eyes. For only the entrance of Peggy and her father had kept Pat from attempting to free the Kid. Old roundup friendship, gratitude, had rolled up chokingly in his heart and driven him toward the barred door.

HE sank down on his chair and his knees felt weak. For Kirby was an honest man and Peggy had told him often that he did not possess a poker face. It was not easy for him to lie with a smile when his heart was sore and his wits bewildered.

The sheriff opened the slot and ordered the Kid to pass out the dishes in which the Chink had brought over his supper. These would then be placed on the large tray, which Peggy held, and returned to the cafe.

"Sure," drawled the Kid, and strolled to the cell door with a coffee pot in his hand. "Sure—I'll give you what you ask for—"

Like the flashing head of a snake, a gun barrel shot through an open square in the grill, rammed against the sheriff's lean middle.

"You're packin' keys, sheriff," rasped the Kid. "Move fast! Open this door!"

Peggy stood with the smile fixed on her face. Then she screamed. The tray dropped with a crash.

Kirby whipped around for a bullet line on the Bitter Root Kid. But as he raised his rifle, the boy snarled. "Don't make a false move! Or I'll blow a hole through this sheriff!"

Sheriff Gale displayed the cold-steel nerve that, for thirty years, had made him a terror along the Bozeman Trail. Without a ripple in his face, barely moving his lips as he spoke, he looked down at the gun, then up and into the eyes of the Kid, not six inches from his own.

"Put that gun up!" he rasped. "Put it up!"

But the Kid was beyond reason. His eyes blazed with a mad light. He was a human wolf and now he had fangs. He could fight the world, fight until he dropped and died.

"I'm goin' out!" he grated between set teeth. "I don't like cells. I don't give a damn who I kill to git out. Move fast, sheriff!"

The sheriff stood straight as a soldier on parade, head up, shoulders back.

"If you kill me," he stated calmly, "it won't do any good. You'll still be in jail. But with a murder charge against you that you *can't* call a frame. Put up that gun, Kid."

Pat Kirby was slowly bringing up his rifle as the Kid threatened the sheriff. He could see only one way out. That was to throw a bullet into the crazed boy before he completely lost his head and murdered Sheriff Gale.

But Peggy, slender body swift as a flame, flashed between her father and the steel cell, offered herself as a living shield to save her dad from the gunman's bullet. And as she clung to the stern old man, her hands searched for and found the keys that he carried on his belt.

The sheriff attempted to brush her aside. But she fought him off, screaming that he must not die here, that he must live for her.

Pat Kirby, hot-eyed, came rushing in but she warded him off as she plunged a key into the lock.

The door swung open. The Kid

stepped out, with a cold grin on his face. The sheriff, now wild with anger, struggled to get at the smiling gunman but Peggy clung to him.

And when Pat Kirby crossed the room, rifle poised for a heart shot, the Kid lined his pistol on Peggy and hissed. "You heard me, Pat. I made my offer. You turned down a friend. For this girl. Well—go slow—or I'll throw lead through both of them."

The sheriff lunged as the Kid edged toward the rear door. Evading the sudden rush, the Kid struck savagely with the barrel of his gun. The sheriff, carried forward by his own momentum, spun through the opening.

Fast on his feet as a cat, the Kid whipped around and jumped out into the darkness.

KIRBY, side-stepping to avoid Peggy who crouched on the floor, rushed to the doorway, tilted his rifle, fired loose-armed. The crash of the gun made the jail walls jump. The recoil flung Pat back on his heels.

Regaining balance, he leaped down the doorstep, bent low to sight, if possible, a living target outlined against the stars. For he felt certain the Kid would make for the stable, secure a horse, flee from town.

Near the corral, he saw an object that moved furtively as a coyote slipping into a sagebrush draw. His rifle flamed again.

A thud of boots, the ring of spurs on the hard ground. Men rushed from the darkness, seized Pat, wrested away his rifle as he fought savagely to ward off the attack. With two men clinging to his arms, he was forced back into the jail corridor.

Laskia stood in the front of the crowd. And a rawboned, hawk-faced man—Sand Hill Krane.

"You turned out yore pard!" Krane bawled. "We'll hang you instead!" He yelled to his followers. "Pitch up a rope!"

CHAPTER III
The Empty Holster

HANK LARD, the Slash Four puncher, shoved forward, uncoiled a lariat, tossed an end over one of the corridor rafters. Ben Laskia stood grinning at Pat. He took the coil from Hank, began to fashion the seven-wrapped hangman's knot that fits so cosily behind a man's left ear.

Sand Hill Krane swung a hand that looked big as a ham hock, slapped Pat across the mouth. The red print stood out against the clear tan of the special officer's face like a fresh brand on a calf.

With an angry curse, Pat flung his weight against the men who held his arms, sought to reach Krane. The Slash Four boss held his ground, slapped Pat a second time, roared. "That's just the start of what we figure to do to you tonight."

Then Laskia completed his knot, flipped the noose over Pat's head. He fought savagely as the rough hemp scratched his neck but four men were holding him.

"Fetch a chair from the front office," shouted Krane. "Somethin' for a drop."

"I'll get it," said Laskia.

Pat Kirby repressed the red anger that blurred his speech, spoke to Krane.

"While yo're holdin' me, foolin' around, that prisoner is runnin' away with the sheriff. Got a gun. He may kill the old man. Why don't yuh act like a white man, Krane? Git after him!"

Krane snarled. "Men are ridin'. We'd have been here sooner, had guards all around the jail. Aimed to bust in an' hang that Kid. But when you fired—" he sneered, "into the *air* so you wouldn't *hit* nuthin', we come on the run."

Laskia passed a chair from the of-

fice into the corridor. Eager hands relayed it to where Pat faced the Slash Four boss. Krane ordered his followers to take up slack in the rope, place Pat on the chair, jerk it from under when the word was given.

A girl screamed. Peggy Gale came rushing through the crowd that sullenly gave way. She thrust her slim body between the white-faced man on the chair and Sand Hill Krane.

"You can't do this!" she pleaded. "It's nothing but murder."

Krane growled. "He turned out the Kid. Let the jailbird go free that ambushed and killed my pardner. Shore we'll hang him! Lay on to that rope, boys."

The noose tightened around Pat's neck, began to shut off his wind. But Peggy flung her arms around his lean middle, prevented the rope pullers from jerking Pat off the chair.

"He didn't turn the Kid loose," she sobbed. "I did that. The Kid had a gun. He was holding it on my father. Threatened to kill him if Dad didn't open his cell door. Dad refused. What could I do?" She turned a despairing face on Sand Hill Krane. "I couldn't watch him kill my father. And—and when Pat wanted to interfere, I blocked his line of fire—"

Ben Laskia, standing in the rear of the crowd, laughed and called out. "Where did the Kid *get* the gun?"

Men, who had hung their heads as they heard Peggy's appeal, now looked toward Laskia. There was something about the grin on his face, something of gloating triumph.

He pushed his way to the front, held up a gunbelt. The holster was empty.

"Here!" cried Ben, "here's where the gun came from."

As Pat stared at the belt, blind rage overcame him. The Bitter Root Kid had vowed this murder and robbery was a frame-up. Here was further evidence that the plot extended beyond the Kid.

For the gunbelt, with the empty holster, that Laskia held, had been unbuckled from Dave Hines' body not two hours before, hung on a peg in the office. Then it had held the gun from which Dave had fired three shots at his killer before passing out.

"Kirby slipped the gun to the Kid," declared Laskia. "But he couldn't get the cell keys 'cause the sheriff was packin' 'em. So they framed this play of holdin' up the old man. Didn't know the girl would come along. But she helped things out by tryin' to save her dad. That jest strengthened Kirby's story, showed how come the Kid got away so easy with a peace officer."

Sand Hill Krane looked grimly at Peggy. She had stepped away from Pat. Anger glowed in her eyes.

"He took advantage of yore good heart," Krane growled. "By slippin' that gun to the Kid, he brought disgrace on yore dad. It's likely the old man will be voted outa office tomorrow by a big majority."

"Pat," she breathed, looking up at the special officer's set face. "Pat—are they telling the truth?"

Pat stuck out his chin, rasped an answer. "If you believe Laskia and Krane, you'll believe anything—"

"Haul on the rope, boys!" shouted Krane.

But Peggy cried out and again flung her arms around Pat. Krane grasped her roughly by the shoulders to hurl her aside.

THEN a shotgun roared. Buckshot swished through the air.

"Leggo that rope!" barked a high-pitched voice. "An' everybody—hands up! Or, By Dad, I'll turn loose with the other barrel!"

Punchers turned wondering eyes on the old man who had suddenly appeared in the office doorway. Smoke curled from one barrel of the sawed-off shotgun he held. But the other barrel menaced every man in the room.

"What's goin' on here?" barked the grizzled warrior, glaring over the tops of the steel-rimmed spectacles that adorned his long, inquisitive nose. "Speak up, Sand Hill! Dang fast! What yuh got a rope around Pat's neck, fur?"

"Jedge, the cuss let the Bitter Root Kid git away from jail and take the sheriff with him. Made us so mad we aim to hang him 'stead of the Kid."

"As jestice of the peace of this county," Judge Snapp blazed, "it's my duty an' privilege to say who'll be stretched. Not yore's, Sand Hill!"

"I got men here," Krane roared, "that will jerk on that rope when I give the word."

"One jerk, Krane, an' you git the other barrel of this gun right smack through the middle of yore shirt." Snapp tilted his old eight guage Greener. "Take Pat off that chair. Remove the rope from his neck."

Krane stood hesitant, glowering. Judge Snapp ripped out. "You takin' orders of the court? Or a load of buckshot?"

Krane growled. "Do what the old fool orders, boys. He's got the drop. Apt tuh kill somebody."

"Yo're dang tootin'," rasped Judge Snapp. "And when I do some killin', it'll be plumb legal. For yuh want to remember that I'm coroner, and as sich, ex-officio sheriff when the reg'-lar sheriff is missin'."

As growling punchers lifted Pat down and removed the rope from his neck, the judge spoke to somebody behind him in the sheriff's office.

"Come on in, yuh slant-eyed biscuit shooter! And git those dishes yo're so worried about."

A Chinaman, in blue canton garments and felt-soled slippers, pushed his way furtively through the mob of snarling men. He was Ho Lee, owner of the cafe across the street, and he had come for the empty dishes that had contained the Kid's supper. While Krane and his gang watched, Ho Lee knelt on the floor, collecting tin pans, and soup spoons. He located the tray that Peggy had dropped, crept into the cell and found the coffee pot which the Kid had carried as he approached his cell door to throw down a gun on the sheriff.

As Pat saw Ho Lee pick up the pot, it flashed through his mind that the Kid had suspected the killer of putting knockout drops in the coffee pot in Hoodoo Cabin. If the Kid could secure such evidence, with the sheriff there as a witness, it might go far toward clearing him of the murder charge.

Ho Lee balanced his tray, laughed as he started for the door.

"Klid drinkee lots coffee! All gone!"

Kirby's eyes narrowed. That was a large java container. If Ho Lee spoke the truth, the Kid must have a special urge for coffee.

The shout of Ben Laskia interrupted his thoughts. Ben was hurling accusations as he stood beside Sand Hill Krane. He was revealing to the judge the empty holster on the belt, declaring that Pat had passed the gun to the Kid.

For an instant, men's eyes were on the judge. Even the guards had relaxed their grip on Pat's arms. Here was his chance. With a lithe swing of his rawboned body, he freed himself. Sandy Hill spun on his heel, reaching for his gun. Pat hit from belt level. His fist cracked against the point of the cattleman's chin.

Ben Laskia tried to jump clear. But as Sand Hill broke at the knees, Pat seized the limp body, shoved it against Ben, jarred the beef buyer's gun arm as he lined his Colt for a close range bullet. The slug whipped into the ceiling where the judge's buckshot had spotted the plaster. Pat reached down and jerked Krane's half drawn six-gun from the holster.

Laskia side-stepped, seeking to

drive a second bullet without killing Krane. But Pat swung with the barrel of his gun, floored Laskia with a rip of the front sight that opened the beef buyer's sallow cheek from brow to the angle of his jaw.

Even as he downed his man, Kirby was backing through the crowd. Men, in their surge of fear, of excitement, shielded him from the judge's shotgun.

That irate old official was howling for Pat to lay down his arms, not to run like a yellow coyote.

"I'm runnin' now!" Pat shouted. "But I'm comin' back! This frame-up's about played out!"

Peggy ran toward him, arms outstretched.

"Hurry!" she pleaded. "Get going before they kill you!"

He thrust her past him and through the rear door into the darkness.

He dared not take his eyes or gun off the men in the room. For he saw hands creeping toward six-gun stocks. If Krane or Laskia had been conscious to whoop them to action, a dozen bullets would have ripped into Pat's form. But lacking leadership, like most mobs, this one hesitated.

Only Judge Snapp roared his angry warning that Pat think twice before running. And the judge, as he shouted, was endeavoring to clear a way through the men who pressed against him by pounding backs and shoulders with his shotgun.

An extra heavy jar snapped the shotgun hammers. The old cannon boomed its second barrel. Plaster fell from the ceiling, showering down like sleet on Krane and Laskia who were slumped on the floor.

The coal oil lamp swung crazily. Pat cocked a wise eye, flipped up his gun, rapped out two shots. The lamp went out as hot lead smashed it to blazing ruin.

Then oil flared up in blue flames that licked at the rafters like tiny serpents. Some of the searing stuff dripped on Sand Hill Krane. The agony stirred him to howling life.

Pat, darting from the rear door, heading toward the stable where he hoped to find a horse, heard the bawling voice of Krane, shouting that he was burning to death.

Men, in that corridor, knew the walls were of old logs, dry as tinder from years of western sunlight. They fought like cattle to escape from the death trap before the flames took hungry hold on the building.

Pat halted, lined his gun, snapped two high liners through the open rear door where men were jammed, fighting to get out.

"Back!" he yelled. "Back—or I'll drill yuh!"

They knew he could shoot the pips out of a two spot at twenty yards with a six-gun. They went back.

PAT whirled, certain that he had gained precious time, moments to get a horse and cinch on a saddle. But as he reached the barn, a slim figure rose in his path.

"Peggy!" he gasped. "What you doin' here? The town's ready to bust wide open!"

"Pat," she answered steadily, "where are you going?"

"Where do you figure? To try and bring back yore dad."

"And the Bitter Root Kid?"

"Shore," Pat snapped.

"Then you didn't give him that gun like Laskia said?"

And when she asked that question, her voice broke and she sobbed. Pat flung out his left arm, drew her slim body closely to him.

"Girl," he asked hoarsely, "you—you didn't believe that fool story? Yuh—yuh had more faith, didn't you?"

"Oh, Pat," she cried, and raised her face. Her heavy hair shrouded it but he saw the glimmer of stars in her eyes. He bent his head. Their lips met—held for a long moment.

Then Pat spoke gently but with command in his deep voice. "Now, Peggy, it's good-bye until I come back with yore father. You hunt up a friendly home to spend the night."

She clung to him, glanced over his shoulder, saw the black greasy smoke swirling through doors and windows of the jail, a flare of red flames back of the haze.

"I'm going with you," she declared. "I won't let you go alone. The Kid—he might listen to me—"

"You can't go." He tried to push away her restraining arms.

But she said: "There's not a horse in the barn. And I could only find one saddle. The Kid must have turned out all the extra ponies so we couldn't follow in a hurry."

Pat bent, seized the saddle she had carried from the barn, flung it across his shoulder.

"There's spare horses up the alley in the Okay feed corral," he said. "Come that far with me. Then I can make sure you get into shelter."

They were halfway between the rear of the jail and the Okay corral when they heard the jangle of the iron triangle that Ho Lee used to call men to their meals. Tonight it was ringing out the fire alarm, for now the roof of the jail was a leaping sea of flames. Sparks shot high into the air. Men were aiding the Chink to call out the bucket brigade by banging away at the stars with their six-guns.

Pat started again toward the corral. Peggy clung to his belt for the glare had dazzled her eyes. A knot of horsemen rounded the upper corner, came roaring down the alley. Pat whirled, thrust Peggy into the darker shadows, swung the saddle off his left shoulder.

He dropped to his knees, hoping the riders wouldn't mark him there in the gloom. But a sudden flare of the fire revealed his tense body. He heard the shout of Ben Laskia,

"There's the killin' coyote, boys!"

Pat's gun flamed first, adding its iron song to the tumult that gripped Blazed Butte. A rider pitched off his horse. The frightened pony whirled and crashed into Laskia's mount. Panic swept all the cayuses. They began to bawl and pitch while riders cursed and grabbed for all the leather in sight.

Given leeway for escape, Pat whipped up Peggy's saddle, whirled, and commanded the girl. "Hustle! Head for the barn while we got time!"

But Peggy didn't answer him. She wasn't there. She had fled into the darkness while Pat fought it out with Laskia and his scouts.

CHAPTER IV
Murder Saddle

THE Okay Barn and Feed Corral stood a block up the alley from the jail and was so located that trails ran conveniently from it to the range country. Punchers, in town for work or a spree, quartered their riding stock here. Citizens, who wished to hire mounts for business trips, were given their choice of ponies at four bits per day. When Pat reached the barn, filled with a nameless terror, because Peggy had disappeared, he saw a dim light in the office.

Slipping up through the shadows cast by the high pole corral, he peered into the dingy room through a dirty window. There he saw Hank Lard, the lanky cowpoke, who not long before had carried the rope for Pat's lynching.

Lard was laughing, and from the harsh notes, Pat believed the man had found a bottle somewhere. He wore chaps, and spurs on his boots, and a six-gun sagged from his belt.

Crouched against the wall farthest from Pat's window, was Peggy Gale. She gripped a bridle in one hand. And her blouse had been ripped

nearly off so that the lamp light gleamed on her rounded shoulders.

"So yuh figured you'd sneak a pony out for yore lover?" Hank Lard laughed. "Well, bright-eyes, yuh come to a dang pore place."

Lard was stalking toward the girl, hands extended like talons. Peggy looked desperately toward the door that led from the barn into the office. Lard roared with laughter.

"I threw the bolt," he taunted. "Yuh don't git outa here tonight. Ben sent me up here to keep a stiff guard on things. And when I caught you tamperin' with bridles an' sich, I was shore glad. Gives me somethin' to relieve the monotony."

As he finished, he flung out a long arm, tore the sleeve off Peggy's waist, tried to grip her slim body in a rude embrace. She evaded him, darted down the wall. He lumbered after her, shoulders shaking with laughter.

At bay in a corner of the room, Peggy began lashing him across the face with rawhide bridle reins. His mockery turned to a violent anger.

"Yuh little hell-cat!" he roared. "I'll show yuh how to treat a white man."

And though she ducked and dodged like a cornered rabbit, he smothered her in his arms, pressed her to his bulging chest, buried his red face in her tumbled crown of brown curls.

Pat Kirby ripped the bandana off his neck, wrapped it around his right fist. Then he swung a haymaker at the panes. Glass tinkled and jagged points ripped open Pat's arm above the hand. But careless of injury, red with a mighty rage, he bowed his head, battered a large enough hole with his six-gun to admit his wide shoulders, and almost dived through the window.

Lard attempted to hurl Peggy aside, turn to meet Pat's rush. But now the girl clung to him.

Kirby, boots widely planted, shouted. "Turn the skunk loose!"

Peggy obeyed, slipped back to the wall, watched wide-eyed as Lard turned, with a howling curse, and rushed Kirby. Even as he came in, red-rimmed eyes almost hidden under brushy brows, he reached for his six-gun.

But Pat snarled. "Guns are out. What you git is a bare-handed beatin'."

And although his right wrist was red with blood, he jabbed an uppercut that cracked off the point of Lard's hairy chin. The cowpoke, tough as rawhide, rocked back on his heels but he didn't fall. He matched Pat for weight and was two inches taller. Also he had the reach.

Pat came inside his guard. As Pat rattled short-arm punches against Hank's ribs, he gasped out: "Peggy —get the horses while I'm workin' over this skunk."

Lard, to protect his body from vicious punishment, gripped Pat in a bear hug that made his ribs crack. But experienced in rough and tumble fighting from years around frontier towns and roundups, Pat let his body go limp, slumped down in Hank's arms, allowed his opponent to believe he had crushed out his strength.

With a snort of anger a threat that he intended to tear Pat to ribbons, Lard stepped away to set himself for the finish punch. The strength was there in his mighty shoulder muscles. But he didn't move fast enough.

His telegraphed blow scraped Pat's cheek as the lean puncher circled. The very force of the blow pulled Lard forward.

Kirby measured, snapped a jab to flip up Hank's head for another shot at the big man's chin. Then he stepped in close, whipped an uppercut that started at knee level. This time, when Hank fell, he went down like a tree hit by a hard wind. His head smashed against the floor and bounced once. Then Hank sprawled out like a man asleep.

Kirby grabbed a lariat coil off the wall, threw a half dozen turns of the hemp around Hank's arms and legs. He gagged him with the turkey red scarf that until now had adorned Hank's neck. Then he rolled the man under the bunk, pulled down the blankets to hide from the eyes of anybody who might enter. He completed the cleanup by taking Hank's bottle off the desk, and smashing it against the stove.

One item Pat didn't neglect. He unbuckled Hank's belt, during the tying up process and ran it around his own middle. He wasn't sure of the gun he carried. But Hank's belt was heavy with cartridges.

As he completed the job, he heard the trampling of hoofs on the barn floor, Peggy came to the door. She had found a sourdough coat in the store-room, an old hat, and a pair of batwing chaps, and had put them on. Now she looked to Pat like a slim boy.

"You can't go without me," she told him. "We'll fight this out together."

The sight of her man battling the lanky bully had put a red flush into Peggy's cheeks, a glow in her eyes. Pat knew that argument was useless. He knew of old that toss of the graceful head, that upward tilt of the rounded chin that forbade argument.

"Come along then," he said resignedly.

SHE was a western girl. She hadn't wasted time while the fight was going on, but had flung a big saddle on a rangy bay for Pat's use, and had located a saddle with shorter stirrups for her pony.

As she stood at the heads of the horses, under the dim flare of the barn lantern, Pat stalked to the saddle she had chosen, recognized it for the first time that night. There was no mistaking it for there were rusty red stains on the horn and cantle and straggling lines of the same deadly color down the stirrup leathers.

"Peggy," he whispered. "You know who last rode this saddle?"

"No. I just picked it out in a hurry because the stirrups fitted me."

"See this red. Dave Hines was shot outa this saddle. The sheriff hung it up in the jail barn when we brought Dave back to town."

Her face paled as she timidly approached. There was something about those red stains that frightened her. It wasn't pleasant to ride the range on a black night of war in a murdered man's saddle. But there was no time now to change.

For in the town, the jail fire had reached huge proportions. Lines of men extended across the street passing buckets of water from the nearest pump to other fighters on the roof. A cordon had been thrown around the rear to prevent the blaze from spreading. Burning embers, that settled on other buildings, were being stamped out. Men knew well enough that if the fire spread, it would turn Blazed Butte into a smoking ruin.

And at any moment, men might rush to the barn to procure extra buckets, or a team to haul a wagon loaded with water barrels.

"We've got to get goin'," whispered Pat.

But Peggy didn't heed him for a moment. She stood staring at the murder saddle cinched on the back of a stout buckskin pony.

"How was Dave killed?" she whispered.

Pat answered impatiently. "Shot outa the saddle. You can see where his blood stained the horn and the back. And then when he fell, more drained down the stirrup leathers."

But Peggy was tracing out a dim stain on a rear saddle skirt with one pink finger.

"How did this get stained?" she asked.

"How should I know?"

"It's the only stain here. And inches away from the saddle seat and stirrups. It's about the height of a man's breast, that is a man about Dave's height. He was short. That's why his stirrups fit me."

Pat opened the rear door that gave passage from the barn into the open country. He led his own horse to the entrance, called to Peggy. "If you're comin' with me, mount pronto."

She obeyed but as she jogged out, with her right stirrup touching Pat's left, she asked another question.

"Wasn't Dave Hines noted all over the range as being an artist with a running iron?"

"Yeah. But his runnin' iron artist days are over. He'll paint no more pitchers on a longhorn's ribs with a hot iron. Pore Dave."

They were riding slowly through the pasture in the rear of the barn, heading for the wire gate that opened to the free grass country.

Peggy leaned toward Pat, whispered. "You know—that queer stain—it almost looks like a picture painted in blood. Like a long-legged animal or a bird or something—"

Pat laughed. "You're just imaginin' things, Peggy."

"But maybe Dave lived long enough to see the man who ambushed him."

"He did live long enough to fire three shots from his gun."

"He might have reeled up, hung to the saddle, painted some clue on the skirt leather."

Pat scowled, then laughed. But he admitted that Dave Hines had been an expert with a branding iron, and in fact, had designed many of the brands in use on the Spanish Basin range.

"He wouldn't live long enough to paint a man's name," he said.

THEY reached the gate. As Pat dismounted to open it, Peggy repressed a scream. She forgot her speculations as to the murder saddle and the possibility of a clue left behind by a dying man—for she saw a white object floating toward her. With the flare of the town fire as a background, it looked like a large and awkward ghost. And this wasn't a night for spooks so far as Peggy was concerned.

Pat heard her exclamation, let the wire gate fall, jumped into the clear and raked out his gun. If Peggy had sighted another scout, then he would fight to get away from town. He wanted to reach Hoodoo Cabin for he believed the Kid had taken that trail hoping thus to secure the coffee pot that might reveal signs of dope.

"It—it looks like a ghost," Peggy gasped.

The object wasn't ten jumps away now. Even Pat frowned and blinked his eyes as he studied it. Then—as he lined his gun—he saw a familiar outline against the distant glow of the fire. The rounded point of a saddle-horn. And instantly he recognized that this was his own gray pony but running loose in this pasture with an empty saddle cinched on its back.

"Yore ghost," he chuckled, "is my ol' top pony, White Man."

"But what's a horse doing out here with an empty saddle?"

"Don't know. Got no time to figure. Mebbe the Kid turned him out so I couldn't find a mount in jigtime. Anyway—if we hope to pick up a hot trail at Hoodoo Cabin—let's ride!"

They went through the gate at a high gallop. Pat's gray trailed a few lengths then checked and started to graze on the good brown grass. With this sod to deaden hoofbeats, Pat and Peggy rode with the speed of the wind. The glare of the fire faded behind the Blazed Butte divide. They struck the first willows of Spanish Creek, slowed a trifle to follow the trail up the stream.

Pat rode ahead for the path narrowed. The Hoodoo Cabin now wasn't a half mile up the valley.

Then, as he topped a rise, he smelt

smoke and saw the leaping flames of a fire. And he groaned.

"The Kid beat us to it. Set the danged cabin on fire."

That meant the Kid was hitting the high spots for a trail through the mountains. In his anger, he might have killed the sheriff, left his body in the cabin, and touched off the shack to hide the crime.

Pat didn't know. Nor did he have further time for speculation. For riders crashed from the brush along Spanish Creek, jumped their horses through the shallows of the stream. They ran squarely into Peggy's pony. Pat heard the girl cry out.

He whirled his bay, plunged down the trail. He saw the girl struggling in the grip of three men. He recognized Laskia when he heard a familiar shout.

"Here's the sheriff's daughter! Git her, boys!"

Pat's gun began flaming. His bay rushed forward, loose-reined. But he dared not fire low, fearing his bullets might strike Peggy.

She battled like a wildcat, quirt crackling as she fought off her assailants.

Laskia shouted. "Head off Kirby!"

Swinging their horses, Laskia's two followers spread apart, fired on Pat from both flanks as he thundered past. His bay went down with a groan, lay quivering. Striking the ground ahead of the horse, Pat flipped up his gun, pumped lead.

One horseman, riding in with gun held ear-high for a throwdown, loomed gigantic against the stars.

Pat's Colt exploded as he sought to dodge the skull-cracking slash of flying front hoofs. But he was knocked aside, sent sprawling. Rolling over, he fought to his knees, snapped his gun again. The cylinder smoked but the weapon was empty.

Then he saw that the first slug, fired as the rider charged him, had hit a living target. The pony was bolting off in blind stampede with its master clinging to the horn.

The second gunman, savage that his partner had been beefed, perhaps killed, heard the click of Pat's gun, felt certain that Pat was unarmed and out of the fight.

Dismounting, leading his pony, cautiously advancing, with gun lined for a death shot, this man approached the willow clump that hid Pat from his view.

Pat awaited the split second for action. When it came, he sprang up, lashed out with his Colt barrel, knocked the second man flat. The latter's gun exploded. Pat struck a second time with six inches of steel.

The gunman, attempting to arise, went down with a grunt. His pony reared back, straightening the reins that were entangled in the cowboy's limp hand.

Pat leaped for the swinging head of the horse, cleared the rawhide leathers, grabbed for a stirrup.

The pony snorted, whipped Pat off the ground as it stampeded.

Up the valley, a high shower of sparks shot into the air as the roof of Hoodoo Cabin caved in. A roof that had been built on a ridgepole from which a man had once been hanged.

CHAPTER V
The Long Chance

PAT spurred down the valley, listening to the boom of hoofs on the hardbeaten ground of the brail. Once out on the soddy mesa that stretched toward Blazed Butte, Pat knew this thunder, that indicated Laskia's flight, would be muffled. Certain that the man would flee to town with the girl because there he would find friends like Sand Hill Krane, Pat decided on a bold move, a desperate attempt, to block Laskia's trail before he reached his goal.

At the mouth of the canyon, the trail bent in a wide half circle toward Blazed Butte. But by riding a dangerous stock trail that climbed up the rims, a horseman could cut the distance, strike the main artery again if he survived the climb up the wall of Spanish Creek Canyon.

Red streaks painted the eastern sky as Pat savagely spurred his pony up the first stretch of slippery going over damp granite that was smooth as glass. Daybreak was coming and the gray light increased as Pat's horse clawed and fought toward the top rim.

"Light for fightin'!" the lean rider growled. "That's all I ask!"

The panting pony lurched, almost stepped off a shelf from which the sheer wall dropped straight down to Spanish Creek. Pat flung his body to the inside, balanced the wavering horse with the quick jab of his right spur.

But that lurch had warned him of his danger, the reckless attempt to climb a trail that was dangerous enough in broad daylight. As the cold chills chased up his backbone, he tightened his nerves by the thought that his sole hope in rescuing Peggy from Laskia lay in safely topping this grim wall.

He rode with greater caution, aiding the horse by careful reinwork, lithe swaying in leather, where the pathway narrowed. Once, he dismounted, and coaxed the animal around a point that flared out above heart-stopping depths.

The dawn was cold but rider and horse were wet with sweat when they at last stood on the top rim. Far to the east, Kirby saw the distant glow of the fire in Blazed Butte. A bitter smile twisted his lips. He was returning to town, he mused, giving all up that he had hoped to gain, returning to save the girl from Laskia. If they caught him, it meant quick death by the rope.

The Bitter Root Kid had escaped. The sheriff was his prisoner or a charred corpse now in the ruin of Hoodoo Cabin. Sand Hill Krane would be sheriff before many hours had passed. Never would the mystery of Dave Hines' ambushing be solved.

Grimly Pat Kirby shut regret from his mind, swung his horse down the buffalo grass slope that quartered toward the main trail on which Ben Laskia was riding—riding with a helpless girl, taking her back to town as his prisoner; taking her to town where inflamed mobsters would taunt her with her father's disgrace, the lost reputation of her lover.

Kirby lashed his horse across the final stretch of ground that flanked the main trail. The tips of spiny sagebrush scratched his stirrups. The dawn wind from the eastern peaks blew cold in his set face. The light had increased until objects could be dimly seen a hundred yards away.

When Laskia galloped into sight, he was leading Peggy's buckskin by the hackamore lead knotted around his saddle-horn.

With a yell, Pat Kirby charged him. Laskia, certain that a fight to the death impended, knowing the horse he led would hinder his movements, cast loose the hackamore rope.

The buckskin bore Peggy out of the fight as Kirby galloped in.

Pat's six-gun thundered. The bullet tore leather off the front of Ben's saddle.

Laskia rolled one spur, flung his horse straight toward Pat to present a narrow target. His black eyes gleamed as he flung up his six-gun to return Pat's fire. But Kirby rode straight in, flung out his arm to drag Laskia from leather.

Swinging back to avoid Pat's attack, Laskia smashed another bullet. The slug drilled Kirby's horse dropping the animal. Pat was hurled from leather.

Grimly, he came up on his

haunches, threw a bullet that creased the flank of Ben's mount and sent the horse into wild pitching. Suddenly Ben's pony straightened out along the town trail with the speed of a greyhound.

Laskia cursed, sawed at the reins, couldn't control his frenzied mount.

Hot-eyed with rage, Kirby leaped up, lashed bullets into the high dust kicked up by Ben's horse, groaned as he saw his target drop from sight over the ridge just above town.

THEN, as he stood drooping, smoking gun hanging in his hand, Peggy rode up. She had quirted her buckskin off into the gloom, awaited the turn of battle, and then returned as she saw Laskia disappear.

"What will we do?" she cried. "They burned Hoodoo Cabin. The Kid must be miles ahead on the way through the mountains. And father—"

It was Kirby's belief that the old sheriff had died in the cabin fire, or had been killed just before it started.

He saw along the divide, as the light increased, the line of pasture fence where Peggy had sighted a spook that turned into his gray pony.

Not far distant, this gray still grazed on the buffalo grass. And nearby were two horses with saddles on their backs. Until now the darkness had hidden them.

Pat and Peggy stared. Then Pat spoke sharply. "Peggy—there were only three horses in that stable when the Kid got away. And here's the three under our eyes with ridin' gear on 'em."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"It's just possible that the Kid *didn't* get away from town. That for some reason he's hidin' there. But he turned out the horses with saddles on to make people *think* he had gone."

"But what would keep him in town? Where would he hide?"

Pat couldn't answer that. But he answered that the surest way of finding a lost trail was to pick up the sign at the point where it had vanished.

"That means," he said, "that we must get back to the jail stable. The Kid headed for that stable when I fired on him. Just before Krane jumped me."

The horse he had been riding was dead so he swung up behind Peggy, put his arms around her slim waist. She touched the buckskin's ribs with her heels, headed down the trail

Sometimes the Kid could see his pard hanging from the ridge pole of Hoodoo Cabin

where Ben Laskia had made hot tracks.

Aware that the town would be awake and vigilant because of the fire, Peggy and Pat left the main trail as they crossed the divide and saw Blazed Butte below them.

From high ground, they saw that riders and footmen were jammed in the main street. Evidently Laskia had reached Blazed Butte and passed the warning that Kirby and the sheriff's daughter were not far away and now hampered by lack of mounts.

Entering the dark alley, creeping down its length, and taking advantage of shadows cast by the rising sun, Peggy and Pat reached the door of the jail stable that opened toward the prairie. It was closed.

Pat swung it open, entered. The girl dismounted, led in her buckskin. The animal stood on the plank floor, eager to enter a stall and sink its muzzle into hay.

Pat lit a lantern, turned down the wick. The stable was still dark.

As he held the light high, intending to unbridle the pony, Peggy cried in a tone of horror.

"Pat—there on the saddle seat!"

His eyes protruded as he saw a red blob there on the polished leather of Dave Hines' saddle.

"Fresh blood," he whispered. *"Where from?"*

Girl and man looked upward toward the ceiling. Above was the hayloft. Through a crack in the loft floor, this blood had dripped.

Pat whispered to Peggy as he cleared his gun. "I'm going up *there.*"

She clung to him, pleaded that he must not take the risk. If the Kid were hiding there, he would fire on Pat as the latter's head showed above the entrance to the loft.

"If the Kid's up there," said Pat. "Then yore dad is with him."

White-faced, Peggy stepped back.

A short ladder led to the loft. Pat handed the lantern to the girl. He instructed her to wait a moment after he had climbed to the loft, then if she heard him call out, to hand up the light.

"If he kills you, Pat—"

"I gotta take my chance," he answered, and began to mount the ladder.

THERE were three rungs. Time passed swiftly but to Pat it appeared that years had flown before he cautiously poked his head above the floor level.

Pat reached down, asked for the lantern. Peggy stood on her tip-toes, handed it to him. He took no chances as he raised it and passed it into the loft. He swung it to the side as it cleared the boards, then dodged back.

Hay whirled aside as the light cut the gloom. Up lurched the Bitter Root Kid. He swayed on his feet but he lined a gun. And the barrel lined on the top of Pat's head.

"I'll not go back!" the Kid snarled.

His gun hammer fell with a dull click. As the Kid reeled back, staring down at the gun with blank amazement, Kirby plunged through the loft entrance, crossed the floor in two long strides, battered down the Kid with his fists.

The boy fell in a groaning heap.

Then Pat, bending, kicked aside the hay, discovered Sheriff Luke Gale, bound hand and foot, and gagged with his own shirt.

Kirby rushed to the loft entrance, cried down to Peggy that her dad had been rescued, was alive.

As Peggy started up the ladder, Pat tore off the ropes that cut into Gale's flesh, took the gag off his mouth. The old man rubbed his arms and legs, restoring circulation, mumbled that the Kid had held him prisoner all night.

"When we run from the jail," Luke ended, "yore first bullet broke the Kid's left shoulder. He couldn't ride. There were three horses in the stalls.

Had the saddles on. He turned 'em out to make folks think he'd got away. Then he forced me up here, tied me up. After that, he tried to strap up his shoulder. But didn't make much of a job."

Pat said, as he bent to check the slow flow of life from the Bitter Root Kid: "Look at his gun, sheriff. See why it missed fire."

And after Pat had twisted a tourniquet around the Kid's left arm, and the latter had opened his eyes, both men heard the sheriff's dry explanation of the mis-fire.

"Three shells in it," he drawled. "Not one live. Look all right but I figure the lead was jerked out, the powder removed, lead put back in and gun reloaded. That way—if a man tried to fight with this gun—he'd be pie for those who jumped him."

The Bitter Root Kid lurched up, cried weakly: "Jes another piece of that frame. That gun was sent to me—I don't know who by—in the coffee pot from the Chink cafay. Loaded with dead shells. So I wouldn't have a show if somebody jumped me while I was makin' my break."

CHAPTER VI
The Judge Answers

BLOWS thundered against the doors of the barn. Peggy, who had been watching through a crack in the window, cried out.

"Men are surrounding the place! Picked up our tracks where we rode in!"

Pat leaped to her side, flung her away from danger, opened the loft window and stared down. Men ringed the barn. A few bolder spirits had crept to the doors, pounded against the wood, more in warning than in an effort to enter.

Kirby slanted his gun, rapped out a shot that turned staring eyes up to where he hung out the window.

"Git back!" he cried. "Or the next bullet hits a target!"

They surged away from the barn. Sand Hill Krane flipped up his gun, fired. The bullet cut splinters from the frame of the window. But Judge Snapp knocked up Sand Hill's weapon and saved Pat Kirby.

"Kirby!" the judge thundered. "If you'll surrender, I'll guarantee you a fair trial!"

As Kirby gazed down, meditating his answer, the owner of the Okay Barn came running down the alley. After him staggered a lanky man with a floursack bandage wrapped around his head. It was Hank Lard.

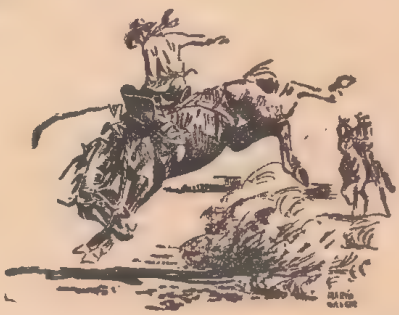
"Found Hank groanin' under my bed!" the barn owner yelled.

Hank spotted Kirby in the loft window, shouted. "There's the man who put me there when him an' the gal stole two hosses!"

The crowd roared. "Burn the barn!"

"Judge!" Pat shouted as a last resort, "I'm comin' down! All I ask is a square deal until I have time to tell what I know. If it don't sound clear, then you can hang me."

"Come down!" . . . roared the judge. "Every man gits a fair trial here!"



But Sand Hill Krane yelled furiously. "Kill the danged murderer!"

His gun flared again as Pat gripped the lower rim of the left window and dropped eight feet to the ground. Men rushed him as he lit on hands and knees.

Judge Snapp and his friends flung forward to save Pat from the charge led by Krane and Laskia.

Pat righted himself, stood on his long legs. Snapp was planted at his right side, another law and order man at his left.

Ben Laskia, lining a gun on Pat, glanced upward sharply as he heard a high-pitched yell.

"Oh, Ben!"

Framed in the loft window stood the Bitter Root Kid. He propped up his swaying body against the wooden frame. With his right hand he bent a gun on Laskia.

A grin creased Ben's dark face. In like circumstance, any other man would have attempted to dodge the Kid's bullet.

But Ben Laskia tilted his gun calmly, would have killed the boy in the window.

Pat Kirby's eyes blazed. With a yell, he leaped toward Laskia, came in under the latter's gun arm, knocked high the weapon so that the bullet meant for Bitter Root sank into the air. Then, while men shouted and cursed, Pat sank his fingers into Laskia's throat, fairly lifted his foe off his boots, flung him savagely to the ground.

Sand Hill Krane thundered that he would not stand aside while a coyote killed a good citizen. But Judge Snapp ran his shotgun barrel an inch deep into Krane's waist.

Laskia crawled up, licking his bruised lips, black eyes glimmering like those of a hissing rattle-snake. He reached for the gun that had fallen from his hand.

KIRBY rammed down a boot on the weapon, shouted. "You skunk! You can never fight fair! You framed the Kid! You stole Hines' gun! Slipped it into the coffee pot that the Chink brought over. But yuh wouldn't give the Kid a show for his life. Yuh dumped the powder outa the bullets. When he lined on you jest now, every man in the crowd was scairt. *All but you.* Why? Because *you* believed the bullets in the gun were bad!"

"You lie!" snarled Laskia, up on his feet but swaying. "You lie! You let him go because he was yore friend."

"He's up there now with a broken shoulder where my bullet hit him, Laskia. No—you worked this frame to disgrace the sheriff and me. So Krane could win the election."

Krane roared as he stood rigid before Judge Snapp's shotgun.

"I wasn't in on the frame-up. If Laskia tried anything, he worked it himself. Maybe he killed Dave Hines."

Laskia reached inside his shirt, jerked out a bowie knife.

The sharp point slashed away Pat's shirt front. He heard the rip of cloth, felt steel against his flesh.

A gun roared. Laskia jerked back, whirled half around, dropped in his tracks, lay there twitching.

The Bitter Root Kid balanced in the window, swaying, a thin grin on his face. "Borrowed a shell from the sheriff's belt," he croaked. "One that *was* loaded."

Sand Hill frowned. "I reckon he musta killed Dave Hines too."

"What for would he kill Dave?" the judge asked. "Course he had time to ride outa town, get hid on the trail. He knew Dave was carryin' money. But all the money—two thousand dollars—was found later on in Hoodoo Cabin."

Hank Lard roared angrily. "Two thousand dollars? Say—I passed by when Ben and Dave had just completed the cattle deal. I heard Dave say clear enough that he was satisfied with eighty dollars a head for fifty cattle. That would make—"

"Four thousand," the judge nodded. "Then Laskia stole half the money from Dave and hid the rest in the Kid's shack as part of the frame-up. Hid it while the boy was asleep from doped coffee."

Pat Kirby smiled toward the old sheriff who stood in the front of the crowd, toward the Bitter Root Kid who had been brought down and stretched out on a wagon sheet for the Kid was weak.

"I figured," Pat said, "that forty dollars, like Ben said was too low for fat stock. I should have follered that up. But mebbe we'll find the rest of the money in Ben's saddle pockets." . . .

Sand Hill Krane gulped and held out his hand to the sheriff. "Dang sorry," he apologized, "for all the trouble this black skunk caused."

Then a girl's clear voice rang out. "Judge—will you answer a question?"

All looked toward the barn door as Peggy came out leading a buckskin pony on whose back was cinched a saddle. She stopped beside the still body of Ben Laskia, stood by the buckskin, pointed to the dark stains on the saddle.

"This was Dave Hines' saddle," she explained. "His life-blood stained it. But men said, from the evidence of Dave's gun, that he didn't die right away."

"Laskia," the girl continued, "was undoubtedly involved in Hines' murder. But I don't believe he was alone. He wouldn't kill Dave just for two thousand dollars."

The crowd fell back, aware that something impended. Kirby stepped to Peggy's side, saw her trace with pink finger a dim red outline scrawled on the skirt of the murder saddle.

"Dave Hines," she explained, "was an expert with a branding iron. He lived long enough, before he died, to draw a picture with his own blood that named the man who killed him. A scrawl of a few lines. But enough —" Her voice broke. "A few pitiful lines made by the shaky hand of a dying man—lines that resembled the outline of a huge, long-legged bird—"

Judge Snapp flung back his head, shouted. "A crane! A sand hill crane!"

The angry roar of Sand Hill Krane muffled the shout. The cattleman leaped toward Peggy, flung up his gun, lined on her slim body. It was Pat Kirby who stepped between black barrel and target, took the slug intended for Peggy, felt its burning slash across his short ribs.

Then his gun flamed, beat Sand Hill Krane to the ground, tumbled the cattleman across the uncaring form of Ben Laskia. Peggy's arm supported Pat as he sank back, shocked and weak from the smash of Sand Hill's bullet.

Judge Snapp stood over Krane, silencing the crowd that buzzed like an overturned bee-hive.

"The gal got it! Laskia was only second fiddle. Krane lined it all up. What for? To inherit Dave's half of the Slash Four."

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VERTEBRAVERY

"Who hit me?" roared Hammer-tail Herbit.

Ol' Boosty's Windies are still taller than his six-foot hosstails!

A Laugh Riot

By

S. OMAR BARKER

"I SEE by this almanac," said Bran Mash Mullens, "where these moderun scientists can take a borned runt and' grow him into a giant, or one with a disposition like a shorthorn bull in a cactus patch an' sweeten him up to where he won't step on a bug, or a feller that's borned to hang an turn him to preachin'—jest by tinkerin' with his glands."

"My uncle down in Texas," busted in the new hand named Lufe, "he had a horse wunst that got a case of the glands, an'—"

"Glanders," corrected Bran Mash. "Horses have glanders. Humans have glands. It says here, 'In the glands has been discovered the long sought mystery of human destiny, the potential source of all bodily change, all mental an' emotional characteristics, the secret of —"

"The secret of foop!" snorted the elderly gent with the six-foot hosstails. "Them sissified scientists claimin' to change the natural born qualities of a man through his glands makes me as tired as a Seehorse & Sawbuck saddle, an' in the same region!"

"That's right," approved Banty McGinnis. "Once a human bein' lives to step out of his three cornered pants, his stick is done pointed. If he's born to be a pewee, he'll be a pewee. If he's destined to be a big shorty with jassack ears an' skeered of the dark, like Bran Mash Mullens, here,

there ain't no half-hitches in his glands nor nothin' else goin' to change him, unless it's bullets in his belly or a rope around his neck!"

WELL, I WOULDN'T exackly say that (continued Mr. Embuster to Peckleberry, absentmindedly braiding one of his six-foot mustaches into the horsehair rope he was making). I've see fellers change mighty complete an' sudden in my time, both in carkiss characterstistics, an' the mental mysteries of mind an' heart. In fack, I perduced some such changes myownself long before these moderun scientists quit suckin' a rubber topped bottle, if they ever did. But it wan't no glands I tinkered with. Nossir.

Didn't I never tell you about Hammer-Tail Herbit, the Hero of Hoohittem County an' all points west?

His name wasn't Hammer-Tail to begin with. His pappy was an ol' sheepman name o' Smith that was always threatenin' to sell off his woolies an' let in to raise a family, but at the time this here son was born, his wife was heard to complain that it looked like Mr. Smith jest wouldn't never git around to it, because here he was, already an old man goin' on forty with only twenty-two kids to his name an' this was the third time runnin' he'd promised her twins an' hadn't come through. Said she be dogged if she wasn't half a notion to divorce him an' marry a family man.

In fack she was so disgusted at this boy for not bein' triplets that she wouldn't even name him, so Mr. Smith had to come through with a handle to call him by. An' bein' No. 22 an' only one of him, Smith called him Single Shot Herbit Low Caliber Smith an' let it go at that. You can imagine the effects of a name like that. Even worse, I expect, than if he'd had a bad case of the glands.

Oh, he growed out man-size, all right, an' man-shape, barrin' the way his chin sloped into his neck an' the way both his eyes kinder focussed on the wart that adorned his nose. But I expect how come him to be so cross-eyed, it wasn't no special interest in watchin' that wart. It was from tryin' to look two directions at wunst all the time for somethin' to spook at.

Timid? Got so ol' Smith couldn't even run him in for the annual count for fear the new baby would squawl an' skeer him back to the rabbits. Not that I knowed the boy at the time.

I'll tell you how come me to make his acquaintance. It was so hot that summer that the horny toads was carryin' toadstools fer umbrellers an' even then it was a mighty parched horny that wouldn't sweat a tin can full a day.

So with all the water-holes dried up, me an' an ol' wobble-wart, Pecos

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Bill got into a squabble over the drip rights to the horny toad sweat in Lean Hard Valley for stock waterin' purposes. As the feelin' between us was gittin' as touchy as a caught hoss-thief with a boil on his neck, I'd begun to look around for somebody I could hire to do my fightin' for me.

First I tried ol' Kit Carson, but no, he said, his mule couldn't run fast enough to fight anybody but Injuns, but he'd be glad to help me look for a fighter. So we was rackin' along the rimrock on our jassacks one day when all of a sudden we seen an ol' jackrabbit lope up to a Spanish bayonet an' delibertly cut his throat. When we looked out to the flats we persoove how come the jacks was committin' suicide. It was pure jealousy an' discouragement because that feller whizzin' off acrost the flats had outrun 'em so bad.

FAST? This critter was so speedy that when he passed a bunch of antelopes, eighty-six of 'em fell an' busted their necks. Yessir, the way this ol' boy whizzed past, they thought they was standin' still, put their heads down to graze, an jest natcherly piled up.

"Wagh!" remarks ol' Kit. "Let's head that hombre off, Bootsy. In case you don't find nobody to do your fightin', he'll shore come in handy to do your runnin' fer yuh!"

So that's how come me to meet up with Single Shot Herbit Low Caliber Smith. We found him all hunkered down in a sink hole, plumb hid except for his south end pointin' north through a hole in his britches, an' shiverin' so hard that the bull frogs a mile away was all singin' tremolo.

"Hey down there!" hollers Kit. "Don't you know you'll ketch the posterior pneumony, exposin' yourself thisaway?"

"Don't keer if I do," comes the quaverin' response. "You'd hide out too if they was a sheep after you!"

We looked around then, an' shore 'nough yonder come a little ol' lamb jest a-blattin' on his trail after him.

"Great Godfrey of the Gigglin' Guts!" I exclaims. "You mean to lay there with your head hid an' tell me you're skeered of a sheep?"

"Yezzir," comes his sad an' muffled answer. "Paw lambed me around so much when I was a young 'un that I got six kinks in my back a-dodgin' him, an' I been skeered o' lambs, an' ever 'thing else, ever since. Don't let it git me, mister!"

"Looky here!" snorts ol' Kit Carson. "How you expect us pioneers to take this country away frum the Injuns if they find out there's a white man anywheres that's skeered of a sheep? You crawl outa this sinkhole an fight this lamb like a man, or I'll bust my big toe on your tail bone so hard it'll jar all your kinfolks!"

"Wait, Kit," I warns him. "You don't reelize how many kinfolks this boy's got! You'll bust a leg shore an' I'll have to shoot you. Besides, all you ol' scouts has got to go down in histry as men that wouldn't kick a feller when he's down, specially where you can't hardly reach him!"

"Wagh!" growls Kit. "Then how we gonna git him out?"

"Well," I offers, "I don't reckon histry will have no objections to a man name o' Peckleberry tappin' him on the tail with a hammer."

So when this Single Shot Herbit Low Caliber Smith wouldn't budge, I taken that two pound hammer I always carried to knock my mule down with of a mornin' so I could saddle him, an' I taken careful aim, an' I played the ol' *tap-tappy-tap-tap . . . tap-tap* on the spankin' exposure of this young spooter's spine.

DAWG me for a wolf, gents, if that Low Caliber Smith boy's backbone didn't snap an' pop the echo right back at me in such perfict rhythm that you could purt near

ketch the words "Shave-an-a-hair-cut —bay-rum" in it.

Then "Woo-haw!" he bellers an' hops outa hidin' like a dotter's squawter, I mean a squatter's daughter, jumpn' over a hawgpen. You talk about gland tinkerin' changin' a man! He hadn't no more'n come to his feet than he starts pawin' the earth like an ol' bull joining' a new herd. I've told you how his face sloped into his neck, but right there before my eyes he begun growin' a chin.

"Woo-haw!" he roars. "I'm a shag-tailed she-wolf from Crazy Crick! Which one o' you hit me?"

"Ba-a-aa!" says this lamb that's been chasin' him.

But instid of runnin' frum this ferocious sheep again, ol' Herbit's hand shot out, grabbed it by the tongue an' flang it so high it come down two weeks later in my hoss trough forty miles away, plumb shorn frum bumpin' around amongst the sharp-edged stars.

"Woo-haw!" bellers Herbit again. "I'm the consternatin' cattymount frum Cuckleburr Crick, an' I want to know who hit me?"

He swang at me with a wallop that would of jarred my grandpaw outo jail, if his cross-eyes hadn't made him miss. (Herbit's I mean, not granpaw's. My Granpaw Tittletoot's eyes was set so close together in his head they didn't have room to cross.)

Then Herbit saw ol' Kit Carson headin' his mule fer Taos, an' he taken after him.

But gents, believe it or keep your pants buttoned, this boy that'd been runnin' so fast hell couldn't singe him not an hour ago, didn't have no more speed to him now than a hobbled hodag. Quick as ol' Kit seen he couldn't ketch him he circled back.

"Wagh!" he says. "This here's the man to do your fightin' for you, Boosty! Lookit him whippin' out that cactus bush!"

'Course I seen right off that Kit was right. You take an hombre that cain't run any faster than this Herbit seemed able to now, an' he's bound to fight if you throw him into a ruckus. An' o' course, he's also showin' the symptoms, since I hammered his tail for him.

"Wagh!" says ol' Kit Carson, same being the Mountain Men's main cuss-word for everything on account it's purt near the only perfanity you can explode with your mouth full o' chaw juice an' not spill any. "Wagh!" he says. "What's come over this lad to make him so brash all of a sudden?"

"I cannot tell a lie," I commences, "I done it with my little hammer. Y'see Kit, them vertebrays is—"

But before I can finish expoundin' my theery, the ground begun to shake, an' yonder come ol' Pecos Bill roarin' over a rise. He was ridin' an ol' she-grizzly with a redhot brandin' iron in her mouth fer a bridle bit an' a pair of windmill wheels fer spurs. He was straddlin' a kak made outa porkypine hides with the spiney side up, no britches on, a live rattlesnake fer a Gee String, a pair of spittin lizards stuck in his belt instid of guns, and a snarlin' old mountain lion perched on each shoulder. There was a hornits nest jammed down over his ears fer a hat, a coupla Heely Monsters fer ear rings, an' a hydrophoby skunk ridin' behind him. His cheeks was bulged out with a chaw of prickly pear, an' ever' time he spit you could see the jackrabbits keelin' over dead a good half mile away, jest frum the splash.

I'm jest about to howdy Pecos Bill an' ask him how come he's dressed fer Sunday school of a Friday, when ol' Hammer-Tail Herbit looks up from the cactus bush he's whippin' an spies him.

"Woo-haw!" he yowls, an' lights right into him. Nossir, you wouldn't hardly think it was the same Smith boy we'd seen runnin' frum a lamb jest a few hours back. He grabs the

ends of ol' Pecos Bill's mustaches, knots 'em together into a swing, climbs up in it an' begins hammerin' away with his fists at the wart on ol' Pecos Bill's nose.

BUT SEEM like he don't hit it to do no good, partly on account of bein' cross-eyed, an' partly because this wart is what is knowed as a wobble-wart, which simply by twitchin' the skin of his face a little ol' Pecos keeps the wart dodgin' ol' Hammer-Tail's fists.

"Well, boil my ticks!" exclaims ol' Pecos. "If it ain't one of the Smith boys! You better git down frum here or I'll sic a sheep on yuh!"

"Smith boys, hell!" hollers ol' Hammer-Tail. "I'm a rootin' tootin' rumpus-raiser frum Rawhide River, an' I kin whup anybody that ever—"

Well, gents pore Hammer-Tail never got the rest of it said, because right then them two pet panthers on Pecos's shoulder throwed their tails like a pair of lass ropes at him. One looped him around the neck, the other 'un around the feet, an' together they swang him, one . . . two . . . three, like a coupla nesters throwin' a hawg over the fence, an' let him fly.

"Kit," I says, watchin' pore Hammer-Tail disappear towards the high north star so fast he smoked, "you better git fer Taos an 'warn the bartenders, because if this boy lands in that neighborhood, he'll jar the bung outa ever' whiskey barrel in town!"

"Wagh!" shouts ol' Kit, an' lights a shuck.

"An' as fer you, Pecos Bill," I says, "what laughin' you got to do, you better git it done, for the day will come when I'll make you laugh outa the other side of your mouth!"

"You," roars Pecos, "an' who else?"

"Me," I snaps back at him, runnin' for my mule, "an' ol' Hammer-tail Herbit, if I ever find him!"

"Pooh-pooh for you!" ol' Pecos hollers after me as I sock the hooks to the only mule I ever had that could outrun a grizzly. "An' in the meantime don't let me ketch you tin-cannin' around in Lean Hard Valley tryin' to steal my horny toad sweat, or I'll tie you in so many knots you won't unravel in hell!"

Yessir, gents, it looked fer a few minutes like he had me beat. Here I'd gone an' made the greatest discovery since Noah learnt how to make whiskey, an' I didn't have nobody to practice it on. 'Course I still had the hammer, an' if I could jest locate that Smith boy again . . .

'Course everybody knows nowdays that it ain't who your pappy was, nor anything you've et, nor them glands Bran Mash was readin' about, that makes a man the way he is. It's all in the way them vertebrays lays up to each other. Well, that's the theery I was workin' on way back before anybody else ever even thunk of it.

YESSIR, by playin' *"Shave-an'-a-hair-cut . . . bay-rum"* on this boy's vertebrays with my hammer, I'd not only jolted the racin' kink out of his back, but also the cowardy-cat joint, makin' him as wampus as a wolf; an' not only that, but once the right vertebrays was jolted, he was growin' a chin where there wasn't nothin' but a neck-slope before.

Why, even Lufe here, iggerunt as he is, can see the possimabilities that lay ahead of me, if I could jest git aholt of ol' Hammer-Tail Herbit agin. Trouble was, he'd jumped ol' Pecos before his fightin' abilities was ripe, an' it looked like I'd lost him.

But he hadn't landed in Taos, nor nowheres near it. When the crescent moon come up that evenin' there was ol' Hammer-Tail Herbit hangin' on one of its horns by his suspenders. Yessir, plain as day, right over the top of an ol' dead snag. All I done, I jest snuck up on the hill, an' when this here moon swung over that snag agin, I shot him out.

What say? Well, by the gigglin' godfrey, if a sailor can shoot the sun I reckon a cowboy can shoot the moon, cain't he? How you know it cain't be done, Luke? You ain't never tried it, have you?

So, quick as my bullet had cut his suspenders an' dropped him outa that old dead tree, outa the moon, I mean, I begun hammerin' that ol' tune on his tail agin.

How come he let me hammer him if he was so fightish? Gents, that part of it was pure luck. Because when he fell out that tree he landed right in the middle of an ol' she Grizzly, an' whilst he was bent over on top of her, chokin' her, I snuck up, yanked his shirt off so's I could observe the effects of my treatment on the kinks in his vertebray, an' went to work on him.

'Course it was kinder experimentational at first. I'd whammed him six, eight times without noticin' any of them kinks snappin' out of his flagpole, when all of a sudden a big, ol' hairy hand reached out frum behind me an' grabbed my hammer. Believe it or save your corncobs, boys, it was that ol' she-grizzly's husband.

"Grr-waugh-grr-woo-grr-wug!" he growls. Which seems to be bear language for "Give me a whack at him, mister!"

Wham! This ol' bear smacks him right on the spinal spot that marks the boundary between monkey an' man, an' immedjitly one of the worst kinks snaps outa Hammer-Tail Herbit's backbone, an' believe it or kiss your mother-in-law, Herbit's hair begins turnin' into regular porkypine quills.

Well, gents, to cut a long tale short, as the monkey said when he tried to whet a butcher knife on hisn, by the time I'd learnt that ol' bear to play the drum parts to Yank My Doodle on the bottom button of Herbit's backbone, he shore was a changed an' changin' man. Herbit, I mean.

WHAT I was interested in, o' course, was developin' the features that would make Herbit a match for ol' Pecos Bill an' his zoo of varmints. Well, Herbit was so busy wrastlin' this grizzly that he never noticed us hammerin' him, but the next mornin' when he'd finally got her choked to death to suit him, he shore was one surprised hombre.

His chin was growed out with an edge on it like an axe, to where anybody that swung at it would split their fists to the elbow. His nose had growed into a regular hay-hook, purt near as long as a stick. All his hair an' whiskers was porkypine quills from a foot to eight foot long. His arms was nineteen foot seven inches long, muscles bulgin' all over 'em like long handled underwear on a squatter's wife, an' fists as big as a hawg ham, dependin' somewhat, o' course, on the size of the hawg. His legs, well, all I got to say is that he'd growed so tall I had to holler twice to make him hear me, an' even frum plumb up there his feet still reached the ground.

You talk about tinkerin' a man's glands to change him!

Nice part of it was, with all this vertebracin' I'd give him, I hadn't ruint his disposition. He still had the fightin' spirit, but not towards no little ol' scrub like me.

"Listen, Herbit!" I hollers up at him. "I've got a fight matched for you that'll beat elephants all to hell! Come on, let's go hunt up Pecos Bill!"

But we didn't have to hunt him, for yonder he come agin, roarin' over the hill. This time he was ridin' a pair of ol' bull mooses, Roman style, one foot clawed into the back of each. An' perched amongst them mooses's broadleafed antlers was eighty-four of the deadliest varmints that ever fed on goat guts. Pecos had aholt of the tails of two of the lions for reins, but there was eighteen more, their

fangs so long they plowed up the ground.

YESSIR, ol' Pecos was right well fixed for varmints.

"Waugh!" roars ol' Pecos. "Who the hell's been hammerin' around here to where a feller cain't sleep?

"Woo-haw!" bellers ol' Hammer-Tail Herbit, an' stuck out his axe-bitted chin. One of Pecos's grizzlies makes a pass at it an' cuts his paw off at the wrist, an' the fight is on.

Yessir, gents, barrin' a couple of nester women throwin' crockery, I ain't never witnessed sech a grim an' deadly battle. 'Course I didn't ketch all the details, account of bein' so busy rushin' around to climb trees an' whack Herbit on the tail with my hammer at jest the right secunt to set his buzz-saw ears to whizzin' an' cut a lion, or a rattlesnake, or a hydrophoby skunk in two.

By the fifteenth day it begun to look like Herbit was goin' to whip him. At any rate he had Pecos Bill's fightin' menagery cut down to where you could see ol' Pecos was thinkin' of takin' a hand in it hisownself.

Then I ketched a look from ol' Herbit's cross-eyes.

"Better whack my tail agin, Boosty," he hollers. "Seem like my vertebravery is comin' unkinked."

Yessir, there's where I made my mistake. When he hunkered over for me to tail-tap him with my scientific hammer again I was so excited I plumb forgot what I was doin'. Yessir, plumb reverted to nature. Y'know how it is, when you see a feller's tail end pointin' high north thataway, what's the naturalest thing to do?

That's right. Ninety-nine times outa ninety-eight a feller will kick it. An' that's what I done then. An' I guess you all know what a kick in the pants will do to a feller. Ain't a one of you but what has saw strong men bust out cryin' an' curly wolves run like a rabbit at the collision of a boot toe with their rearward regions. Jest kinder takes the spizz out of them, I reckon.

So the instant I done that to pore ol' Hammer-Tail, the fight was over, an' he didn't git ol' Pecos whipped after all.

No, ol' Pecos didn't slaughter him, because right then one of them sudden northers blowed up an' he had to git for Lean Hard Valley an' build fires to keep the drip from freezin' up on his sweatin' horny toads.

What become of Hammer-Tail Herbit? Well, seems like that kick of mine also jolted a vertebray that uncrossed his eyes, an' he got so wore out tryin' to see if that wart was still on his nose that he let that axe-bit chin of his drop, an' it cut his throat!

Yessir, gents, believe it or go fer your glands!

CIRCUIT RIDER

By BENNETT FOSTER

OLD JOHN GUNTHER, good old man, rode circuit in 'seventy-eight,
West from Taos his journey ran, over the hills to Clark's Toll Gate;
North from there he took his way through the pass to Cooper's Gap.
Old John Gunther, each Sunday, preached a sermon, then took a nap.

Old John Gunther hitched his team to his buckboard. Took the lines,
Headed out along the stream, on the road up through the pines.
Drove 'til noon, then ate a snack, after he had said a grace.
Hitched again and clambered back. Drove on at a rapid pace.
Meditated as he rode on his Sunday sermon's text.
Chose, "The wrath of God is sowed." Wondered what he'd speak of next.
Rifle shot broke up his thoughts and there came a fierce shout,, *"Stop!"*
Checked his sermon when he'd got just to "sixthly," made it flop!
Two masked men with guns in hand came a pushing through the pines.
Separated, outward fanned. John pulled on his horse's lines;
Reached a hand beneath the seat; pulled a rifle from its boot;
As a preacher John was beat, but, by Gosh, he still could shoot!

Old John Gunther took a spade, dug a grave both wide and deep
In the pine trees' peaceful shade. Put the outlaws there to sleep.
Said a prayer when he was through; carved a rough hewn wooden cross.
That was all that he could do; John drove on to serve his Boss.

BRIMSTONE

A Stirring Novelette of Strange Loyalties in an Owlhoot Hideout

By

JAMES P. OLSEN

Author of "HELL BOUND BUSCADERO," *etc.*

CHAPTER I
Owlhoot Haven

FREEZING winds slashed the deep Texas hills, blew death in icy, relentless gusts. Icy Killian rode before this storm, came through the rocks and the twisted junipers, dropped over the rim and rode down into Satan's Soupbowl country, two heavy guns worn tied-down on his legs.

Sixty miles from nowhere, a second from hell, back in civilization folks damned this wild basin and wanted no part of it. It was too close to the Border, too much a haven for wanted men.

Wanted men were a business with Icy Killian. He felt the sawed-off shotgun under his coat, held there by a loop over his shoulder. A carbine rode under his left knee. He thought of the words of the sheriff, sixty miles back there and a brittle, glacial twitching of Icy's lips went for a mordant smile.

So Satan's Soupbowl and the hamlet named Hades had gone too far. The few hard-crusted ranchers who'd held on in the Bowl were raising hell with the county seat and threatening to go to the governor. Two deputies had been sent to Hades, and had gone right straight to hell. So they'd sent for Icy Killian.

Not a young man any more. Aging, and with the scars of past battles beginning to bother him. Rheumatism was taking its toll and his heart was showing the signs of the years of saddle-pounding. But he never admitted these things, not even to himself. He was Icy Killian, the man who'd spent a lifetime at herding the law in a final, definite way. Kill them first and no questions needed.

The men of the owlhoot trails hated his guts. And decent men, peaceful men, showed too much meekness, too much of loathing, or too much of fear when they were near him. Icy Killian —the killer . . . It was that way with a lot of the real old peace officers. Hickok, Earp and others . . . How men had cussed them, yet turned to them, and when they had gone, they had become heroes.

Icy hunched against the driving, chilling rain. Who said it never got cold down here? And he couldn't stand so much any more. He laughed mirthlessly. He, who'd always prayed to go out with his boots on, with guns thundering in his ears, wouldn't it be a hell of a note if he should die in

BOUNTY

Two deputies had been sent into Hades, that haven of wanted men, and both had ended up in Boothill! Then came a third—Icy Killian, who would stake his life to give even a snake or a coyote an even break . . .

bed? He sighed. He was tired. He'd had his life. Yet a man must go on and on . . .

He crossed a rise, dropped to the extreme level of the Bowl floor, wound across a brushy flat and came out on a sweep of gray barren lands. Five hundred yards beyond lay Hades. No shelter for it. Men with their eyes on their backtrails want free vision all around. The very location of Hades showed what it was.

Icy reined up. He blew on his hands, slapped his arms against his body, worked his shoulders. He unbuttoned his coat so his shotgun would be easy to get to and surveyed the town of Hades. One big adobe building with a saloon sign swinging in the wind, a smaller one next to it, bearing the sign of a store. There was a blacksmith shop sprawled at angles to these two. Running out beyond the town, adobe-log shacks. Most of them had sagging doors, no windows.

HADES wasn't as prosperous as it had been once, before the outlaw clans took over and ran all but the hardiest of ranchers out.

This was the place of which the sheriff had said, when Icy had come in answer to an offer and had been sworn in, "You'll have no luck trying to run a jail. Every hombre down there, outside of a few ranchers, is a more than cut-of-the-run badman. Your guns will be court, Killian. That's all." And he hadn't offered to shake hands.

Loosened up, Icy rode on. He thought of those things, and of the information that a man named Buck Ring ran this wrecked refuge for the wreckers of the range. Some years ago, now, Icy had met Buck Ring. It was odd that one or either of them lived now.

Cold eyes, without fear or hint of compassion, watched a man come out of the saloon and go to his horse. Icy drew one of the heavy, worn six-guns and held it cocked in his lap. Nobody but a show-off or a damned fool ever took the chance of giving a killer an even draw. Just a warning, and then some lead.

Icy delved into the precise filing case of his mind. And he placed this man as the fellow swung aboard his mount. It had been five years since he'd heard of this Dunch Chanute. No wild kid gone wrong, no unfortunate who'd been shunted off the ways of right. But a killer who gloried in his

name and trade. The sort of low son Killian had spent a lifetime in hating and wiping out.

A heavier coldness settled within Icy. That here was opportunity to strike two blows in one, he knew. If he was elated, he showed no sign. To announce his arrival, wipe out a snake and a future dangerous enemy would serve very well. It would be a kind of calling card.

Implacably, with no more expression than a block of stone, Icy came on. Dunch Chanute had turned a snarling face toward Killian. Strangers to Hades must stand inspection of a most concentrated sort. Chanute hunched, his eyes gone half closed. He battled to place this man, and did! He remembered this lawman, remembered the cowpuncher he and two others had killed in cold blood. Those other killers were blasted down without parley. Chanute had run like the yellow dog he was.

"Killian!" he croaked, fear showing in his eyes for a moment.

Chanute's right hand raised instantly. The gun he'd slipped out and held hidden behind his saddle swell, flashed to a level. There was an eager triumph in his attitude. What a notch this would be, what a glory to tally Icy Killian!

Icy Killian didn't waste motion raising his arm. He just pulled his wrist out so his gun would clear his saddle fork, and let his thumb off the hammer. Without changing expression, he pulled the hammer back and let it fall again. He made no sound as he watched Dunch Chanute grab at the saddle horn as those two shots went home.

A scream of fear, of terrible hate, squalled into the wind and rain. Chanute battled, hung half off his horse and raised his gun again. Calmly, Icy Killian shot once more. Then Dunch Chanute was down in the mud and his horse was sidling away from the body . . .

ICY KILLIAN's eyes encompassed everything with an expert attention. Fresh shells were in his revolver and the sawed-off shotgun was unslung and in his hands.

A Mexican peeped out of one of the shacks, ducked back. Icy unlimbered and stood down. He bit back a twinge of pain that ran through his legs. His high-heeled, old-fashioned full riding boots squished the mud as he walked toward the saloon, the shotgun in his hands. He kicked the door open, stood back, then went in.

There was a Mexican swamper, eyes fondly on a door into some rear room. The other occupant of the saloon was a white man, a man about Killian's age. The years had etched heavy lines on his sad, strong face. But even those lines could not erase the stamp of the man's reckless bravery.

He stood outside the bar, a shotgun in his hands. He looked wearily at Icy.

It was Icy who spoke first. "Lower your whacker right along with mine, Buck Ring. We'll lay them on the bar. I ain't ready to kill you yet. It's cold out there. We'll have a drink. That's my word."

Buck Ring did as Killian ordered. He knew Icy Killian. "It's colder in here now, Icy," he whispered. "And I didn't put down that gun because I'm afraid of you. I allow we'd blowed each other all to hell. I ain't ready for that—yet."

He motioned the swamper to take the bar. The two men lifted their drinks, watching each other warily. "I allow it was Dunch Chanute you got," Buck Ring said. "I'll have him got out of there. It's lucky for you, not me, though, that most of the ones who use Hades, is riding out today."

"It was Chanute," Icy said. "A low, damned—"

"A thing a skunk wouldn't lift a hind leg to," Buck Ring agreed, a snarl in his voice. "One of the stripe that use Hades as their stamping grounds. Damn them all!"

Icy Killian was not surprised by this. Buck Ring, who ran this town of decaying buildings, would hate his customers. They drank, and their eyes met. There was something more than dislike in their glances. Something each tried to hide. They would kill each other, in time, perhaps. They'd watch each other. And they'd respect each other, too . .

"I want to talk to you," Icy said. "Before I forget, where, later, can I get a place to eat, an' mebbe-so a place to bunk?"

"Madre Hermosa might feed you, and your horse, Icy. She hates outlaws, but does their washing, and such. As to where you'll bunk, it's easy to tell you that." He walked to the door and pointed beyond Hades. There, bleak, rotting in the swirl of the storm, were the headboards of Boothill!

The clean bunk in the earthen floored room invited Icy tonight. Outside, the sleet was beginning to make picking, ghostly sounds. The wind howled in werewolf voices across the Bowl. Icy's bones ached and a overpowering weariness possessed him. But he must drive himself on and on.

HE SAW to his pistols, his shotgun, went out and saddled his horse. He led it up the street and left it before Ring's saloon. Hades showed no lights. Not even dogs were out. The tall, beginning-to-wilt figure of Icy expanded as he sighed. Where was romance in such a dark, rotting hole? There was only discomfort, death, a job to be done. A job of killing that would make men fear, hate, shrink from him. He envied, almost, those men out in Boothill.

He left his horse near a deserted shack. Always being ready for any emergency was second nature to Icy Killian. He went in to see Buck Ring. He did not pity Ring. Men didn't need pity. He respected him, and reckoned he'd have to kill him sometime. Icy had his shotgun in hands when he went into Ring's saloon.

The swamper was alone behind the bar. And loud, irate voices jangled out past the partly opened door at the rear. A man came backing through that door, hurling threats as he left.

"We're tired of it, Ring. You sell to these outlaws and make it possible for them to live hereabouts. And you have that girl here to attract the—"

"Elmo, that's enough. I'd oughta kill you for that!" There was no denying that Buck Ring was fighting to hold himself. His voice shook. "I've treated you ranchers right. Don't make me kill you," he said wrathfully.

"I'm—well, I'll chaw that back," grunted Elmo. "But you know where Steve Hart is. I'll have that rustler's life."

Elmo stiffened, his face went pasty white. Something was prodding his spine. He wheezed as he turned his head, and a low sound came in his throat when he looked into the set, merciless eyes of Icy Killian who held the shotgun to Elmo's back.

"What's this about rustlers?" intoned Killian. "You see, I got an interest in them. I'm Killian. The sheriff sent me here."

"F-for God's sake, get that gun off me," begged Elmo. "I'm John Elmo, one of the few ranchers left in these parts. I was one of the men who demanded that the sheriff do something here."

Icy didn't lower his gun. He motioned Elmo back into the room he'd just quitted. It wasn't Icy's way to take a chance. A trick might be in order here.

Inside the room a table was set and Buck Ring's supper was growing cold. Ring, breathing heavily, stood by an overturned chair. Across the table from him sat Sheila Ring. Even Icy, who had no time for women in his life, was struck by the gentle beauty of this girl.

Here was no common woman to at-

tract the wolf pack. But here was womanhood in all its radiant bloom, the kind that would make the deep-land buzzards of this hell town split the world asunder to win her.

Icy kicked the door shut. The girl watched him as a bird might watch a snake. She failed to suppress a little shudder as she noted his set eyes, his stony face.

"A'right, Elmo," Icy said. "You, Ring, sit down. An' you'll keep your paws in sight. Now, Elmo, what's this Steve Hart deal?"

"He's a young devil. Wild. Got some cows, a bit of graze, toward the Border, beyond my place and some grass owned by Tom Frane. Frane and me hire all the men we can afford, or get. We close-guard all the time. And still our men are hazed, shot, and our beef is run off. But this Steve Hart, who's by himself, with only a Mex picked up to help when he has extra work, never loses none! We missed stuff last night. Two of my men were wounded and one of Frane's. Most of the stuff's over the Border by now, but we found six head hid in a draw on Hart's spread."

"Would he come here?" Icy sniffed. "If so, why?"

"Because Steve Hart and I are to be married as soon as we can," Sheila Ring broke in, her voice ringing with pride. "He calls on me. And he isn't a rustler. If these other ranchers would only see!"

"Then why," demanded Icy, "wouldn't this Hart lose beef?"

Buck Ring half rose from his chair, and then sank back. "Because I passed the word nobody was to bother Steve Hart!" he snarled. "And I know who it is has pushed this off, left those cattle there. Didn't quite dare kill Steve themselves. A dirty skunk that has his eyes on—uh, nothing. That's all I got to say." Ring's glance shifted toward Sheila and then away toward the men.

Icy shrugged. "Reckon I'll go after this Hart, anyhow," he said stonily, ignoring the stricken face of the girl. But he couldn't ignore Buck Ring.

Ring was on his feet, his shoulders hunched. "Icy, Hart ain't a match for you. I know the way you get your men. You ain't going to get him that way. Get ready, Mister Icy Killian. I'm going for this sixgun of mine. To hell with your scatter gun. Even if you blow my head off, I'll make out to split that frozen heart of yours!"

CHAPTER II
"He Isn't A Rustler!"

IN AN isolated old house two hundred yards away, Madre Hermosa lived. Perhaps, in her day, Mother Hermosa had been a beauty, and had made love in the old patio while the moon did things to young heads and hearts.

She was withered now, with a skull-like face, clawish hands and a tongue as sharp as a stiletto of Toledo steel. She let Icy Killian stable and feed his horse, and grumbled at him for expecting her to feed every ladrone at all hours. But she put a meal before him.

As near amused as he'd ever be, or show, Icy assured her he was no outlaw, but a lawman.

"It is all the same. Good lawmen die and bad lawmen are worse than outlaws. This is no place for the good," the old woman croaked. She put frijoles and tortillas before him and stood by, her shrewd parrotish eyes observing him closely.

"You are one cold one," she decided aloud. "You kill. Now you be killed. Like someday will be killed Señor Buck Ring."

Icy paused, looked up. "Buck Ring. Señor Buck Ring, eh? He runs a store for killers, hides them here. He is an outlaw. I thought you hated such?"

"He is no such!" she lashed out, "He is good man, who try to be good.

Once, wild. Once in prison. But no low killer, him."

Icy knew as much. That was why Buck Ring hated his customers. They were worse than outlaws, a disgrace to that name.

"But dangerous, too," Madre Hermosa added. "But for Buck Ring, the *cabrone* Al Taug would have taken the Señorita Ring long ago."

Icy halted his eating once more. He hadn't known Buck Ring had a daughter. Didn't believe it yet. He questioned Madre Hermosa and the old woman unloaded answers for him. *Si*, a daughter. A girl baby born right after Buck Ring had been shot down and then sent to prison, eighteen years ago, and a curse to the lawman who shot him, too! Just because he needed money and helped rob a gringo bank.

Ah, Icy remembered that fight. Three men dead in the street. And Buck Ring, a young cowman, with guts to fight it out with Icy Killian. They'd both gone down and Ring had gone to prison. Icy Killian knew damned well Buck Ring had not shot to kill that day. He'd drawn his shots. And Buck Ring had always sensed the deadly Icy Killian could have killed him as they lay there in that street.

Icy learned, too, that Buck Ring had come to Hades several years ago, when there were more ranchers and honest men in Satan's Soupbowl. He'd bought the store and the saloon. Then, the influx of killers, rustlers, scum. Old acquaintances, men who'd done time with Buck Ring, came on.

Buck Ring had brought Sheila, his daughter, here with him, because he aimed to live a decent, honest life. Lonesome those years when Buck was in stir. After her mother had died, the girl refused to leave her father when the road got rutty and ran swampy with men's blood.

These things did Icy learn. When he was done with his meal, Madre Hermosa slapped a hand down on the coin he put out. She held out a hand for more. "Advance the dinero," she snapped. "I give a room to you here. Advance it. Maybe tomorrow you not here to pay."

CHAPTER III
The Room In Back

DEATH was omnipresent in this room. Icy Killian, a man who was said to have no heart, Buck Ring, who'd held dangerous men in check, who'd seen dreams fall, who could and would hold his own with guns.

Icy had a feeling of regret but there was no evidence of such a reaction. Buck Ring felt respect for Icy, but no fear.

Elmo and Sheila were held spellbound with fright. "Don't try 'er, Buck," Icy said, his lips barely moving, "This ain't the time for you an' me. Be patient. That'll come. I seem to recollect, one time, I didn't kill a young waddy when I went after him."

"That time ain't now. You'll not go after Steve," answered Ring and his voice was tense.

"Why should anybody come after me?" cut in a voice through the partly open door.

The door moved. Icy stepped back, and in that moment, Ring knew he was very near to death. Let Steve Hart make a move, or let Buck Ring make it, and that shotgun would blast. Icy would take no chances here.

Steve Hart walked into the room. He looked at Sheila, and the smile that was on this tall, young Texan's face was good to see. He looked at Elmo, at Buck, and then at Icy.

"Easy, Steve," warned Ring. "This one with the gun is Icy Killian. You've heard me spin tales of him, once in awhile."

"Why would you come after me, Killian?" Hart wanted to know.

"Because you're in with the rustlers, and because we found six head of mine and Frane's beef on your range this morning," growled John Elmo.

Patiently, Hart began to defend himself. "I deny that. I'm tryin' to make a payin' business and a home here. I ain't throwin' no hoofs across the Border, or edgin' with them that fog in here with blood on their hands and other folks' money in their pants. But I reckon they'd be no use in tellin' that to Icy Killian. What you aim to do?" he said facing Icy squarely, proudly, with just enough of indecision and fear to show the true man in him.

Icy's expression never changed, but he was grinning down inside. "Do?" he said. "Place you under arrest, Hart. They ain't no jail, so I'll bond you on your word. Reckon you won't rush off an' leave this girl."

"You can't do this!" Elmo bawled. "Our cattle—"

"Your cattle," cut in Icy, "will stop travelin' when I clean up this hole in Hades. I ain't here to chase cows. I'm here to do other work and help those who come runnin' in for me. You'll do smart, Elmo, to tell the others an' you to be ready to back me a hand."

"And get wiped out!" blasted Elmo, his flushed face registering contempt. "To hell with you. I see the play. A lawman who's afraid, and who'll play in with these devils overrunning the Bowl. To hell with the sheriff. I'm riding for the governor to send in men. There's a few Rangers yet."

"Go ahead." Icy's voice was brittle. "By the time you get back, this thing'll be over here. Now, get out. If you won't help, don't be in the way."

Elmo cursed violently, and, covering the others with the shotgun, Icy drew a pistol with his left hand. He jabbed the barrel into Elmo's stomach. Elmo bent forward. The gunbarrel tapped his writhing face, then rapped on his head.

"I said to get," Icy ground out, as Elmo turned and fairly ran from the place.

Icy dismissed the man from his mind. Too much a loser, too harassed, too close to things to gain true perspective, Icy didn't blame him for what he said.

The shotgun was under Icy's patched old coat, but Colonel Colt still nestled its worn rosewood buttplates in his hand. He put the full force of his gaze on young Steve Hart.

"You come to court? I mean court this Miss?" he demanded.

Steve Hart gulped and reddened. Sheila lowered her eyes. A grin split the face of Buck Ring, but the face of Icy Killian was cold.

"WELL, not exactly," Steve admitted. "Though I'm always glad of the chance. I mostly come to talk to Buck tonight. I know that Al Taug is comin' in again. He just came back to Frio Muerte's ranch. An' the whisperin' leaves says things about more of the bunch ridin' from the north. Where a bank an' a train—"

Hart ceased talking suddenly, his eyes on Buck Ring.

"It's all right. Don't mind me," Ring said. "I only sell to them, make way for them, because what else can I do? I've held them off so far. But the day is coming when Taug will be done with me."

"This Taug. Yeah. I've heard of him, an' his side, this Mex Frio Muerte. Cold death! He'll find hell hot. But I'm thinkin' this girl had better go," said Icy.

"No!" cried Sheila. "If I leave, they'll be right on dad, and maybe Steve. I won't. This is our chance in life, here, and—"

"An' the chance to die." Icy shrugged. "But it's your life."

"An' Taug's, when he dares even look at her again!" Hart promised solemnly.

"So Taug has been below Border," Icy mused. "With beef, I allow. An' north, they's been a train an' bank robbery. I allow they're gatherin' to parcel the haul. Hart, how you know these things? Seein' as how this Taug tried to wind you up today."

"I got word. Word to tell Buck here to have supplies ready, an' to rid Hades of any outsiders that might have drifted through. I ain't of these devils. But they's things a man oughta do."

"You ain't sendin' no word, or gettin' nobody out," Icy said flatly to Buck Ring. "When I've done here, you an' me can have 'er out. Move against me, you know what you'll get."

"You can't buck the whole thing," Steve Hart warned.

"I'll show you," Icy said coldly.

He was back in the corner then, gun ready, when someone called from out front. Buck Ring's throat moved. "Blackie Karve and Skip Wall," he droned. "Hell, I couldn't do anything now."

"Which ones are they?" Icy demanded.

"Fast men of Taug's," Buck Ring said. "If you want to know what they do, ask them. I'm being hurt by this, and being rushed into Boothill by you, Icy. You're putting me between you and them. Go out and see for yourself."

Icy nodded cooly. He dug for his shotgun, thought better of it. Maybe those two wouldn't buck him with that shotgun in hand. He wanted them to get on the prod.

"Hart," he rapped out, "You stay here. I'll be on the watch. You don't look like a killer, but I don't go on looks. Ring, you get up behind the bar. Watch your paws."

Ring groaned as he walked from the room. Icy edged out and shut the door. Sheila was sobbing as she went into Hart's arms. The sense of death in this place was overwhelming.

Out there in the barroom, thick, dark, with long, dangling arms, Blackie Karve stood up to the bar. Lank, without a line of character in his face, Skip Wall stood at his elbow. They greeted Buck Ring as gruffly as they dared. Then they spun about.

Skip Wall scowled, but Blackie Karve pressed his back against the bar, and his tongue whipped out over his lips. "Ah, you, damn you!" he snarled. "Icy Killian . . ."

That name, even though he did not know the man, brought Wall into a crouch.

Icy stopped a matter of some twelve feet away. You couldn't tell where those chill eyes of his were focussed, or just who he was looking at. "Once, when you threw down your gun an' crawled out of a town like a yeller hound, I told you there'd be another time," Icy intoned. "You was with a devil called Taug, even then. A devil I always ached to meet, after I heard how he treated that woman, up on the Missouri."

Karve growled low in his throat. A warning to Wall. He tore his eyes away from Icy. "Ring, how comes this lawman here? Taug'll have your heart for this. What's happened? Where's Chanute? He was supposed to meet us up on the rim of the bowl."

"Chanute had the bad luck to run into Killian," Ring said levelly. "Like he knows so damn many others of your kind, he knew Chanute. Taug is owing me for having Chanute buried today."

"Taug'll pay the lead he owns," Karve said thinly. "Come on, Wall. We're movin'."

"No, you ain't," jeered Icy Killian. "You're handin' over the loot from a train an' a bank. You come from the north, or you wouldn't have been to meet Chanute on the rim. Hand 'er over, or do I kill you before I take it myself?"

CHAPTER IV
Grim Pact

FEAR slapped across the face of Skip Wall, a terror that was possessing and driving because it was a double one. He feared the cold inhuman man before him, and he feared Al Taug. Taug had selected well in having this pair carry back the northern loot. They were fighters both, and stood in dread of him.

"Wait, you fool," Karve growled at Wall. "He'd kill us as sure as he stands there." He sneered at Icy Killian. "You come out with your cutter cocked an' hangin' at your side," he said. "You—"

"Cinch up!" Icy warned. "You've shot men in the back. Why should I stake my life just to give a snake an' a coyote a even bite at me."

"Ring, are you with us?" Wall yapped. "You ready to draw a iron? We'll smoke down this—"

"When time comes, he'll get what-for for what he's doing for *me*," Ring cut in. "But I ain't getting pill-full for you."

"Stop gabbin' an' get goin'," Killian commanded, and icicles seemed to drip off every word.

Karve sought to check Wall's desperation further. "It's in our saddlebags," he growled at Icy. "Come on, Skip."

They turned carefully, keeping their hands heart high and away from their guns. They marched toward the door, and together they crowded through it. Just clear of it, Karve made a croaking sound. He leaped to the right, and Wall to the left, and then they were fogging for their guns.

Icy Killian took a quick step. His gun thundered, thundered and crashed out twice more. One shot, the first, went under Wall's left arm, bored in through his heart, the second shot broke his neck—good safe measure for his kind. The third bullet caught the spinning Blackie Karve in the right hip and knocked him down. The fourth slug was Karve's. It made a rushing sound above Icy Killian's head and buried itself in the far back wall.

"Karve!" Icy barked.

Karve wouldn't, just wouldn't hear. He lay there, half in and half out of the thin, dirty yellow light that fell out the door into the sleet-punctured night. He groaned, rolled over and his gun came up once more. Icy leaned a bit forward and once more the flame and lead ran out of his gun. His expressionless face was like a high, snow-covered peak hemmed in with drifting fog. He jerked his head out of this gunsmoke now.

Moaning, Karve lay there in the light, his gun arm shattered. Icy stepped forward and wound fingers in the collar of Karve's mackinaw. He tugged heavily to drag him inside with one free hand. Once, it flashed in him, he'd fairly bounce this man inside. Age saps strength.

A little damp streak smeared behind the wounded man. Icy dumped him there before the bar. He turned, and his eyes were gimlets to Buck Ring's face.

"I give you respect I never gave another man," Icy snapped. "I give you the little chance to shoot me in the back. Get your paw off that gun under the bar, Buck Ring. You hear?"

Flat-expressioned, Ring's right hand came up. He stared squarely at Icy. "May be I wasn't aiming to use the gun on you."

"Reckon you wasn't. I don't need help for only two who're fool enough to think they can cut that old door stunt on me. But keep your paws empty an' bring some whiskey here. I'm patchin' this thing up an' sendin' it to Al Taug."

Karve set his teeth but made no

complaint. Had Taug been far away, Karve would never have taken this without raising a whining bellyache. It was very likely that Taug and the rest of his men might be on their way here now. For supplies, to get rid of Ring and Hart, to get the girl, maybe for a dozen reasons.

Icy half turned, while Ring held whiskey to Karve's lips. Steve Hart stood in the back doorway with Sheila, whose eyes were wide, stricken, looking at Icy with disgust and accusation. She was in Hart's arms.

"Reckon you know better than to try anythin', with her so close to you," Icy grunted, as he turned away and went out. In a few minutes he returned, bearing weighty saddlebags over his arm. They chunked and clinked dully when he tossed them down.

He made a crude bandage for Karve's smashed arm and hip. Together, he and Ring took the man out and loaded him on his horse. Karve groaned a curse and went off into the night.

BACK inside, Buck Ring turned on Icy. "I'd ought to killed you when I had your back to me," he raged. "You know what you've done? Taug and his men will come here and tear this place apart. They won't be far away. Likely between here and Frio Muerte's. They got a camp there. They'll be coming here for supplies and to spend. Or would have. Now—damn you—" He choked.

Steve Hart came up.

"You reckon you could take the girl an' get to hell out of here?" Icy asked him, ignoring Ring.

"No! No, I tell you. Steve and I won't leave, so you can shoot my father down in cold blood," burst in Sheila.

"It'd be dangerous now, anyway," Ring said dully. "If they should catch them on the trail—"

"An' you blame me," Icy sneered. "Ring, we got to lay our cards on the table. I got some respect for you. You feel that way about me. But we ain't rightly on the same trail to trust one another. Well, we got to, now. Hell's a-comin' to Hades. We got to be together. You're dragged into this now."

Ring was silent as he stared past Icy Killian. "Maybe I wanted you into it this way," Icy said softly. "Anyhow, you got to fight them now. I'm sorry as I can be that your gal is into this. Well?"

"Damn you," Ring growled, "you know you got me hunk. But, Icy, if we live to see this done, I'm having it out with you. Hades was bad enough, but now—"

He broke off, strode to the bar. "They won't be here for some little bit," he grunted, as he gulped down a drink.

They sat down at a table. Steve Hart and Sheila looked at the two enemies. A glint of admiration for these men was in the young man's eyes. But the girl could not understand. And she was more sorely perplexed when Icy looked up and said, "Well, Hart, the business you come on is over. Better do your courtin' before the music starts. Comes then, all you can do is dance."

Though his voice was flat there seemed to be strange undercurrents of warmth running through it. Steve took Sheila's arm and led her away toward the rear of the saloon. When they'd gone, Icy said, "Buck, you got somethin' in life. Somethin' that makes me damn jealous of you."

Ring started. Could he believe his ears?

"To her, to Hart," Icy proposed and they raised their drinks. Icy slammed his glass down and poured another one.

"An' here's to Taug an' them others. Hopin' they suffer all the way to hell! From Hades to hell."

Again they drank. Buck Ring offered Icy a cigar and bit the end off one himself. He merely raised his eyes when a cold blast blew in. The Mex swamper was sneaking out. He'd spread the word among the few others in this place.

Icy arose and chunked the stove, regained his seat. "It was a day like this they hauled you off to prison, Buck. I sort of hated to see you go."

"I hated to go," Buck answered. "My wife, you know."

"You should've told me. I might've done somethin' to help."

"You? With your name and that frozen face and rep!"

"THE work a man does puts marks on him." Icy's voice made a brittle sound. Hell! he couldn't be trying to chuckle? "Like the gun marks you put on me, Buck. But you wasn't a killer. I never felt no hate for you. Damn a killer, a back-stabber, a bad one for all the pure, mean, lowness of it!"

"I'll be a killer, if we live," Buck said dispassionately. "I might've held back trouble here, and finally got Sheila to go. You rookused that. Don't forget for a minute we got a meeting—if we live . . ."

"Here's to it." Icy sipped his liquor. He sighed. "It helps a man's bones, Buck. The old bullet wounds stop achin' when a man takes a drink."

"And his rheumatiz is helped," said Buck Ring.

"You got that huddem failin' too? Buck, you ever try usin' poke leaves, crushed, an'—"

"That ain't so good as horse liniment. And a man gets our age, he should stay out of the storms and such."

"I never will," Icy said, finishing his drink and getting up reluctantly. "I'll die with these old boots on. An' anyhow," he said angrily, "who says I'm old?"

Buck Ring smiled faintly.

"I'll be out there in the night," Icy grunted. "No tricks. We'll have our meetin'—after."

"Here's to it," Buck Ring answered and he held out a hand.

"Just because I let that likker make me talk fool a minute," Icy glared, "is no sign I'm likin' you."

But just the same, his own hand met Buck Ring's.

CHAPTER V
Guns In the Dawn

OUT THERE where the freezing wind drove sleet like shot against his face, Icy hunkered before an old jacal. He saw Ring's Mexican storekeeper slip his family out of Hades, watched a wood hauler whack a burro loaded with his few possessions, after them. They headed for the rim to the north, those wise ones. Yes, the swamper in the saloon had passed the word.

Icy wondered if there was any use in warning Madre Hermosa, and decided not. Likely just get a tongue-lashing for his pains. He thought of the warm bunk down there and cussed stoically. There had been a time when he'd revelled in such a vigil, the chance to turn his guns loose on Al Taug and his kind.

Funny, he thought, he wouldn't gun a wild waddy or an unfortunate man. But he'd gotten a raw name, just because he had no mercy for hellions and their murdering ilk, and wouldn't be fool enough to give them an edge that would get him killed.

A lot of Icy's coldness was a defense against the world. But folks, he figured, would never know. May be he'd get it tonight—or tomorrow . . . Well, it was getting about time he cut his string.

He got up and circled the store and the saloon. A low-turned lamp in the saloon was the only light he saw. Buck Ring sat in there, away from

the lamp's ruddy glow. A lonely man, aching with the cold, Icy Killian went his rounds, his dreaded shotgun in his hands.

The wind shrieked and mourned as it blew across Boothill. Icy thought of Skip Wall, where they'd rolled him back against the saloon over there as a welcome to Al Taug. He thought also of a fresh board that was dimly discernible in Boothill, Chanute. How in hell could a man feel sorrow or compassion for one of his kind? How many innocent people had suffered for the doings of men like him?

Icy touched his old hat in a mocking gesture to Boothill. When came the time of Icy Killian, Boothill would not find him shy. Never would a graveyard receive a braver man . . .

The sleet abated, but the wind kept up. The hours waned. It lightened in the east, then grew pitch dark. In the lee of the deserted adobe jacal across from Ring's, Icy Killian warmed his hands against his body and steeled himself against the night.

He heard no sound save the mournful wind. And he received no sign, save that of his own chilling nerves and the sense of impending trouble. He had developed that sense or had been born with it, and more than once it had saved him from bullets in the back.

He knew that feeling now.

Crouched, he strained his eyes and ears. He got it then, the soft squish of boots in the half-frozen muck. The door of Ring's saloon opened, and he counted the forms of six men going in. No warning, no shots came from Ring. Double-cross, or what? Icy became more tense as he moved forward like a phantom. He heard a man moving in the direction of Madre Hermosa's shack, he heard another curse the cold and kick his feet against the ground. Al Taug had taken no chances, and had scattered his men.

At a little patch of brush near the burial ground, Icy found what he sought. He smelled horses, then heard them. And he located the watcher in the dark. There was no sound save the hard merciless smash of a gun-barrel on that man's head. Icy loosened tie-ropes and reins from the brush and it took no urging for those horses to drift back south, before this wind.

HE WORKED back then. Never a seeming hasty move, yet he made speed. Here was the perfect manhunter at work. A man without nerve or feeling, so it seemed. He passed those men along the way. And crouched low, near the stiffened body of Wall, outside Ring's door.

"And I tell you, Killian is dead!" he heard Buck Ring protest. Loudly. Very loudly. Icy nodded approbation. Buck Ring was saying that for Icy's benefit. "You saw Wall out there. Well, I pretended to go see about Wall. I shot Icy Killian through the window, dragged his body out and tied it on a horse and let it drift."

"That's a damn lie." Al Taug's voice fitted him. A huge man, with greasy black hair that hung down in his eyes, a man who would torture women, and kill men for the fun of it. "And where's that money, Ring?"

"Taug, there wasn't any. Karve must've lied."

"Ring, Karve is dead. Because he failed. I cut his throat. You've been high-handed lately. I let it ride because we needed you. We don't no more. We've cleaned up and can sit a spell. We'll be running this end ourselves. Now—"

"And what'll I be doing?" Buck Ring snarled.

"Roasting in hell, along with Steve Hart. But don't worry, Ring, I'll be taking particular care of that wench you wouldn't even let a man get near. Now, having settled that, the dinero!"

Gray showed again in the east, no

false dawn this but the first light of day. Icy gripped his shotgun. Had to do it now, before someone holed up in the crumbling 'dobes spotted him. He tensed his fingers on the hammers of the scattergun.

As he went through that door, he heard Al Taug yell, "Get 'im, men!" Then Icy was inside. He gave one yell, and then hell, full of brimstone and hot lead moved into this place. As Buck Ring's gun cleared the bar, his shotgun blast throbbed into men's ears. Blue whistler sprayed from that sawed-off double-tunneled weapon of destruction.

A man grunted, fell. Another screamed until it seemed his throat must split and he went spinning across the room. And as still another man writhed and prayed to his God, tables went over, and the shotgun roared once more. Ring's six-gun barked.

Icy moved steadily, his shotgun dropped, a pistol in his hand. A man ran for the door in the rear. It opened a crack and Steve Hart's six-gun was faint addition to that terrible din. The runner paused in mid-stride, then slid down on his face.

Icy lurched to one side, and his expression changed. He turned, dodged a flying table, but the edge of it caught him and spilled him. He heard Ring bawl and shoot. Too late. Al Taug's killer's luck still held. He hadn't tried to fight. He'd dropped to the floor at that first blast. Hidden, to hurl that table and leap out the door when he saw the chance.

Icy slammed the door as bullets beat against the wood. He saw Buck Ring who was looking down, heedless of the blood that spilled from a gashed cheek. He shut his eyes against those men there on the floor. Three were dead and another, mercifully, was dying. A fifth held his chest and spat up blood, where Ring's six-gun slug had bored through a lung.

"Maybe they'll tail 'er now," Ring choked.

"NOPE. I loosed their horses. We might's well get this over now." Icy was too calm. He couldn't be human. He paid no heed to Sheila's little scream, Hart's low curse as they came up, then ducked back. Hart put Sheila in the back room and came on forward.

"Your job's to stick right with the girl," Icy ordered. "Ring, you cover me. We ain't goin' to hole in here an' be smoked out."

"But what—"

Icy stooped and raised the wounded man. He held him before him and went to the door. Blood was seeping down Icy's left side. My God, he had to wind this up before he lost too much blood.

The wounded man groaned. Icy raised his voice. "A'right, Taug. One of your men's a shield for me. Go 'head an' shoot."

He kicked that door wide and shoved out. The wounded man screamed as gunfire dabbed through the drab, stormy light of morning. Bullets thudded into the body of Icy's shield but Icy was no longer there. He was behind a crumbling 'dobe wall twenty yards away. He cursed softly and a stinging pain ran up his right leg.

"Damn your kind! Kill even one of your own men!" he yelled, but gun crashes drowned out the sound of his voice. Coolly, blinking when damp 'dobe was knocked by bullets into his eyes, Icy spotted the flashes. He had a commanding position here. Let a man try getting away from or to the saloon or store and Icy had him under the gun.

He pushed the shotgun up now, mapped those flashes, and once more Hades rumbled and echoed to that thunderous sound. A man coughed, somewhere in a ruin ahead. Another cried out. And then Al Taug was

shouting for them to rush him out.

Icy Killian drew his six-guns and set himself.

Men were coming at him, ducking, bent over, their guns with the muzzles streaming ragged fire. He stood up, emptied one of his guns and shifted to the other. Men fell, some crawled, others lay very still. The attack broke. They spun and ran away. Buck Ring stood in his doorway, pistol in hand, firing steadily. From the rear of the saloon, Icy could hear the beat of Steve Hart's gun.

A man leaped out back there, went to his knees then onto his face. Icy thumbed shells into his six-guns and holstered one. He knew he'd been hit again, and a great weariness, not without pain, was overtaking him. He heard someone else yell, Steve Hart's gun once more.

Off to the right of Icy, a man framed in the door of an old 'dobe shack half fallen in. Flame lashed out of his hand toward Buck Ring. Buck Ring went down slowly, the strength running out of him. He sat there, back against the bullet-splintered doorframe, and his head sagged forward.

It was poor targeting in this shifting light, and now cold rain came suddenly down again. Icy fired. He heard Al Taug yell, and Taug, in that old abode, dropped down. His gun roared and Icy felt the wind of it and fired back.

Weakness was having its way with him now. He reeled as he stood cursing Taug, who'd run while his men died.

The crunching smash of an old-fashioned rifle sounded on down the trail. Down there where Madre Hermosa's keen old eyes had sighted Al Taug. She lay atop her house, did Madre Hermosa, and could sight Taug over a partly fallen wall up here.

She hated killers. She despised Taug, that such a one who had her wash his dirty clothes, then spat and laughed when she asked for pay. Again that old rifle rang out.

Al Taug spurted out of the ruin like a seed pressed from a grape. As he ran, he heard Icy yell. Taug's nerves shrieked. In this rainy, cold gray light, men lay crumpled in gruesome attitudes of sudden, violent death. Wind stirred a man's hair, and tugged at another's clothes. And Boothill lay beyond . . .

Taug croaked crazily and fired twice at Icy Killian, who leaned against that bit of 'dobe wall. The shots went wild. Icy fired. God, how weak, how uncertain he was! He stepped out, his bloody face set, those cold eyes staring straight ahead. Taug backed, fired, turned to run. Icy let go. Taug's left leg went out at an angle as he went down. Icy wavered, dropped, then went crawling toward Al Taug on his hands and knees . . .

CHAPTER VI
The Scars of Battle

THERE was no strength in Buck Ring. He could not move. He sat there, his blood running into that stained, shell-littered mud. He watched, and prayed. Steve Hart's gun was silent. Icy would have to get Al Taug.

Taug shrieked and fired. Mud splashed into Icy Killian's face. He batted his eyes, fixed them on Taug and hitched himself along. He stopped, drove a shot from his gun. Taug jerked upward and fell back snarling and yelling and snapping like a poisoned wolf. He kicked with his good leg, clawed with one hand and got himself three feet farther along from Icy Killian. Then he stopped, gasping. Once more his gun laid sound into the pushing, deadly quietude that now held Hades.

Icy jerked to the impact, squatted like a broken animal, then moved on.

Choking, calling on a Maker he'd so ignored and outraged, Al Taug found wild, crazed strength. He clawed and rooted and wallowed along. He raised his head now. A sound not of humanity slashed past his lips. Taug's eyes went wide, wild, with an insane kind of fear.

He looked again. There! Right there a few feet before him. The rotting, sagging headboards of Boothill! Taug rolled over. He thrust his gun out. Staring ahead, moving relentlessly, Icy came on. He paused now. Two shots crashed out together. Taug sagged and his last breath made a blubbery sound in the mud.

Icy turned. Would he ever make it? How could he? But he did. He got his riddled body over beside Buck Ring. He propped himself. "Ab-about huh-horse liniment bein' best for rheumatiz, now," he wheezed. "Poke leaves, crushed—"

"Dad! Mister Killian!"

Sheila ran out and dropped on her knees. Steve Hart, a blood-soaked rag around his head, his eyes blinking through a fog from a grazing bullet wobbled behind her.

"Just bring—whiskey," Buck Ring begged. He grinned at Icy. "Looks like you and me ain't going to have that meeting. I'm glad. Folks don't know, rightly, what a great man you are, Icy."

"Drink, an' stop gabbin'," Icy growled.

They drank. Steve Hart rolled them smokes and put them in their mouths. Sheila fought back her tears and tried to smile.

"Reckon they's rheumatics an' aches an' pains where we're goin', Buck?" Icy muttered. His eyes, on Buck's face, never changed.

"If there is, a bottle of horse liniment'll fix 'er," Buck Ring gasped. The cigarette fell from his lips, his head slumped. Icy didn't move, but the lids closed slowly over those icy eyes.

MEXICANS, Icy Killian will tell you, are just plumb dumb. No good doctor, a white man, with any sense would try to patch up two old fossils as bad shot up as he and Buck Ring were. But Madre Hermosa was Mexican, and therefor maybe dumb. But she knew herb secrets of the Indians and of the early Dons. She wouldn't give up.

"Shut up!" Madre Hermosa would scream. "It is Diablo and the lead in you that makes you pain. It would hurt the face of you, Señor Icy, to give just once one smile."

"Horse liniment on his face would help," Buck would offer.

And then it would start again.

Long days followed. Days while the country rang with the news. Taug, the dreaded Frio Muerte, Coffin Boak—these and the rest were dead.

Time passes. Even in Hades. It is no metropolis now. But Satan's Soupbowl is thriving with honest ranchers, and the town has thrived apace. You can see the law there. He is a limping, aging man who doesn't like storms, but prefers to sit with Buck Ring in the saloon on bad nights.

He totes two pistols and a sawed-off shotgun, and still can use them when the occasion calls for it.

He never smiles. His eyes are cold. But there are those who know the friendship that can lie within his shot-scarred breast.

Sometimes folks tire of the ceaseless argument about a cure for rheumatism. They never say as much. And a lot of them would like to make Icy Killian smile.

Steve and Sheila Hart might tell you about that.

Icy told them, when little Steve was born, he aimed to keep in practice. And when the kid grew up and he and Buck taught him poker—well, Buck could teach the deal, and Icy the poker face.

And the bounty of those brimstone days is rich in lasting peace.

Every second counts when you're

One Minute From Hell

By JAMES WARD

Ace Kuraine watched from across the street.

DESPERATION'S dark clouds seldom are apparent until the sun of hope is blotted out. But Sheriff Dal Riley had no inkling of disaster on this day.

He whistled as he latched the gate behind him, waved a kiss to his wife and went to his office on the ground floor of the shabby old courthouse in Gulchville. The sun was warming and birds sang in the cottonwoods outside the window. It was Dal Riley's birthday, and he was happy.

He had a fine wife and baby, a job he loved, and the respect of decent men. And the gun inspired respect of the lawless, too. Dal Riley hoped this day wouldn't bring some glory hunting badman, some revenge seeking fool here to test his gunmanship and hard-won authority.

There had been many such men. Some of them had been buried. Others had ridden far from Gulchville, to put down their fear and nurse their

wounds. Still others had gone to jail . . .

Riley skimmed through the mail, tossed aside a few reward posters, with a grimace. His right hand moved involuntarily toward the locked bottom drawer of his desk. Then he drew it away, quickly, as though the very motion had burned the flesh down to the bone.

Anger swept through him. Here he was spoiling a perfect day with gloomy thoughts of disaster. He fished out his old briar pipe, packed and lighted it and drew the smoke deep into his lungs.

Two short steps sounded, and a man entered, closed the door. Dal Riley swung around, a smile of greeting on his lips.

But dark clouds of desperation gathered on Dal Riley's face instead. His eyes narrowed, and with an effort, he maintained his calm.

The newcomer was of medium height, with a thin, freckled face, cold blue eyes, and nervous hands that played above the tied-down guns he packed. And his face, too, assumed an expression of fleeting surprise. Assumed, not real. As though he'd known . . .

But they drew masks, as it were, across their faces. Masks that scarcely hid the fact these two men were traveling mentally back into the past, while a threatening future loomed ominously ahead.

"The Kid," Dal Riley said briefly. "I heard you were in these parts. But what description I had—well, I never did stop to think it might fit another man."

The notorious gunfighter and outlaw shrugged.

Dal Riley was thinking back to the time seven years ago when he'd first met this man. Then, he was Ace Kuraine, a Mexican Border lawman, second best to none.

Funny, Dal thought. All the descriptions of The Kid he had seen and he had never stopped to think how those descriptions had matched Ace. Kuraine, now an outlaw-killer, once an officer of the law. It was funny how positions changed with the years . . .

"I knew a man once, Kid," Dal said, picking up his pipe. "Name was Kuraine."

THE KID shook his head. "I heard of him. They say he was framed and boxed, because he was so close to the law he wouldn't never give a man a break. So he went brawnk. I think."

"Umm. Seems I heard of once when he did give a young kid a break. Changed that boy's life."

Again The Kid shrugged. He, too, was thinking of other days. Thinking of the wild young cowboy who'd been running wet cattle across the Border. And of the time in Pecado, that sin-dimpled Border hell, that that young cowboy had fought with three of the most vicious men even a town like Pecado could produce.

That cowpoke's name—so he told Ace Kuraine—had been Tex Dallas. And here he was, as Sheriff Dal Riley, after all these years. Riley was the law now—and the former lawman outside the pale.

Both of them could see again Cholo Mike's place, in Pecado. The smell of unwashed bodies, Black Frow and his knives, Cholo, and Aquiles Reyes, king of the hell along that strip.

There was that dingy, stinking cantina, and Ace Kuraine in the disguise of a peon. A disguise they penetrated all too soon. And Tex Dallas—now Dal Riley—a little drunk and mad as hell. He was loudly refusing to have a hand in stealing cattle from a rancher he'd once ridden for. And telling them where they could go . . .

But men didn't quit Reyes and go off, maybe to talk later.

It was Black Frow who saw

through the disguise of the peon at a table, and hissed it in Cholo Mike's ears. Reyes, teeth gleaming, face writhing, had given the signal. He drew.

Black Frow had turned and flung a knife straight at Ace Kuraine. And gunsound rocked the place. There was magic in Kuraine's draw; there was less speed, but more accurate deliberation in the draw of Tex Dallas.

Kuraine had gotten the knife in the flesh of his left shoulder. And Black Frow, a mist of red hazing about his head, was falling to the floor. Cholo was down behind the bar, pawing for his gun with his left hand. His right arm was broken by the cowpoke's shot.

Reyes, yelling at the top of his lungs, staggered Tex with a shot. Tex and Kuraine sent lead into him, and there was a bullet for Cholo when his head bobbed up again.

Men were running for the cantina. Breeds, buzzards of all descriptions. All on the kill.

Shoulder-to-shoulder, those blood-smeared gringos battled toward the door. Guns thundered, throbbed in eardrums, knives whizzed, spun, clashed. Gunbarrels rose and fell, and the eddying layers of gunsmoke whirled thicker.

"'Member the Alamo, cowboy!" Kuraine croaked, beating in memory at a leering face that bobbed up before him.

Tex Dallas kicked a man in the stomach, pistoled another one. They went on, slashed, shot, beaten. They trod over the bodies of those they sent down in the slow, hellish press to gain God's great outdoors. There, at least, they could die with no cantina stench fouling their last breaths.

They gained it. Two ripped, bloody, powder-begrimed men who moved by heart and instinct alone. They helped each other to their horses, and together they rode out of Pecado in a final spray of shots. And when it was night, they stopped at a water-hole and patched each other up. They stayed at the water-hole for several days.

"Without us helping each other," Kuraine had said, "we'd both died back there. At least, they'd gotten me."

Riley had shrugged wearily. "I was sick of all that. Too late, I reckon. You see, I got into this for the fun and hell of it. Then it was too late. I —I was in on that bank robbery a month ago. They're hunting me."

"They haven't found you," said Kuraine."

Tex had blinked. "But—but you. They say Ace Kuraine—"

"Is too hard to let a diamond scratch him," Kuraine cut in. "That I got no heart, and would kill my own mother if it served the law. Don't be fooled so much. Forget the bank stuff, and the rest. You helped me clean up the worst place on the Border. You've made up for all your foolishness."

"They's one man they say never forgets. He's a Bank Association detective, and general head-hunter for bounty. He—"

"He's a skunk!" Kuraine snarled. "Forget him. Stay on the right side of the law. Forget that Hound Crake bounty hunter."

THEY had parted, then. Seven years ago. And through those years, Dal Riley had married, become a respected officer of the law. Yet there was always that darkening spot. The reminder of it was an old wanted poster put out by Hound Crake. A poster asking for Tex Dallas, dead or alive.

A holdup for the hell of it; wet cattle. And always he must live in fear of law . . .

And Kuraine, now a hunted outlaw too.

Kuraine—now The Kid—shifted his feet uneasily. "I heard a fellow

say that Kuraine you spoke of, was rigged by a detective named Hound Crake."

Poker-faced as ever, they stared at each other.

"I heard, too," said The Kid, "that there was a sheriff here who was hell on badmen. I sort of wanted to see him and find out."

"Well?" Dal Riley's lips were dry.

"Well, now I don't know."

"As the sheriff, I ought to arrest you, Kid," Riley said. "But I'm wondering. Likely we'd shoot too straight, or not near straight enough. So here's this: You leave Gulchville. Now."

"You ain't trying to arrest me, eh? Because of that man Kuraine you knew?"

"No. If that Kuraine was here now, mind you, I'd tell him we never owed each other a single thing. To The Kid, I'm saying why don't you ride on, and get on the right side of the law?"

"I'll think it over," The Kid said. He walked over to the door. "By the way, did you ever see Hound Crake? Funny, but he's about my heft and build and general looks when seen from a short way off."

The door closed. Head sunk on his chest, Dal Riley sat there at his desk. So Kuraine, The Kid, was warning him what Hound Crake looked like. That would be no good. He couldn't kill Crake—bounty-hunting breed he was. And Crake must be somewhere near, or Kuraine wouldn't have spoken as he did.

Despair etched deep into Dal Riley's face. He couldn't stay here. But there was his wife and baby. Must he give them up? Should he stand and go back with Crake? Or run, and be damned to the owlhoot forevermore?

Damn it, he couldn't stand it in here another minute. He pulled on his coat and went out to walk aimlessly along the street.

He did not see Ace Kuraine watching him from a doorway across the street. Nor did he see, until they were almost upon him, the two men who entered Gulchville from the direction of the South Trail.

He did not know, either, that Kuraine expected these men. That he had passed them on the trail two nights ago.

Kuraine called a soft warning from the doorway. Dal Riley turned, the sun glinting bravely on his badge, that insignia he'd kept so clean and respected these years.

He looked at the dish-faced big man atop a sorrel gelding. And did not know that he looked into the eyes of death in the form of Ike Kittle. A dozen states wanted Kittle for a hundred brutal crimes.

The other man! His whole soul blanched with despair.

He had never come face-to-face with Hound Crake. But he knew the other man was Hound because he looked so much like Ace Kuraine. From a little distance, one might have sworn it was The Kid.

Dal hesitated. The strength seemed to run right out of him. There was a pounding, roaring noise in his ears. Some deep instinct caused his hand to move to his gun.

Hound Crake's weasel face twitched and his mouth opened. His hand made a slapping sound as it contacted his gun. Ike Kittle was unlimbering his pistol, too.

"*Get* him, Sheriff!" called Ace Kuraine imperatively.

Reaction seized Dal Riley. Without thinking, he made his draw. He heard Crake's gun, as though sounding from a great distance, and felt a bullet pick at his coat. And then there was the impact of his own jarring weapon exploding in his hand. He heard another gun roar twice, saw with dimmed eyes that Ike Kittle had flung his gun away.

Kittle grabbed at thin air, plunged

to the street, kicked once and then lay very still.

Kuraine was coming into the street. All up and down, men were calling, running, banging doors.

Dal Riley dropped his arms at his sides. He watched Hound Crake through the darkening haze slide slowly, slowly off one side of his horse. Ace Kuraine stepped up, caught Crake and lowered him to the ground. Crake looked at him with a hell of bitterness in his gaze.

"Damn you, Kuraine! You and this sheriff here. We heard, down the line, he was hell, and aimed to pay a call and really see."

"You'd killed him, and Ace Kuraine would've got the blame," Kuraine grunted. "That's what you thought. But it's no go, Kid. You've turned your last killing and holdup and laid it at my door."

"They never believed it was you?" Crake rasped.

"No," said Kuraine. "The night you turned brawnk and robbed a bank you was supposed to protect, a half dozen responsible men knew where I was. Even though you dressed like me, and dropped words to sound like me. They knew. But we let you go on, and I've been catching up with you."

Hound Crake coughed. Pink froth formed on his lips. He looked at Dal Riley, who seemed to be paralyzed. Crake frowned. "Seems I seen, or heard of you, you damned—law man—"

He quivered then relaxed slowly in death.

MEN were pawing for the sheriff then. Congratulating him for bringing down the Kid. Dal Riley escaped them and walked back to his office. Seeming hardly aware Ace Kuraine was at his side. Inside, Riley lowered himself into a chair.

"Crake—wasn't coming after me!" he mumbled dazedly. "He didn't seem to know me at all. And Crake was really The Kid, Kuraine. You said Crake went outlaw and tried to make them think it was you. Yes? Then why'd you let me think—"

Kuraine sat down, smiling from ear to ear. "Riley, I've known for three years where you were and how you was getting along. Never mind how. I never quite lost track of you. When I came in here today, you took me for The Kid. And I found out you thought The Kid was a man you once knew. A man gone brawnk. Well, I aimed to try you out. See if you'd be all law dog, or if you be human enough to give me a chance."

Dal Riley was beginning to smile. Kuraine continued. "Now, you'll never worry about Crake any more. You've made things go, made them stick, Dallas—I mean, Riley. No more worry about the past."

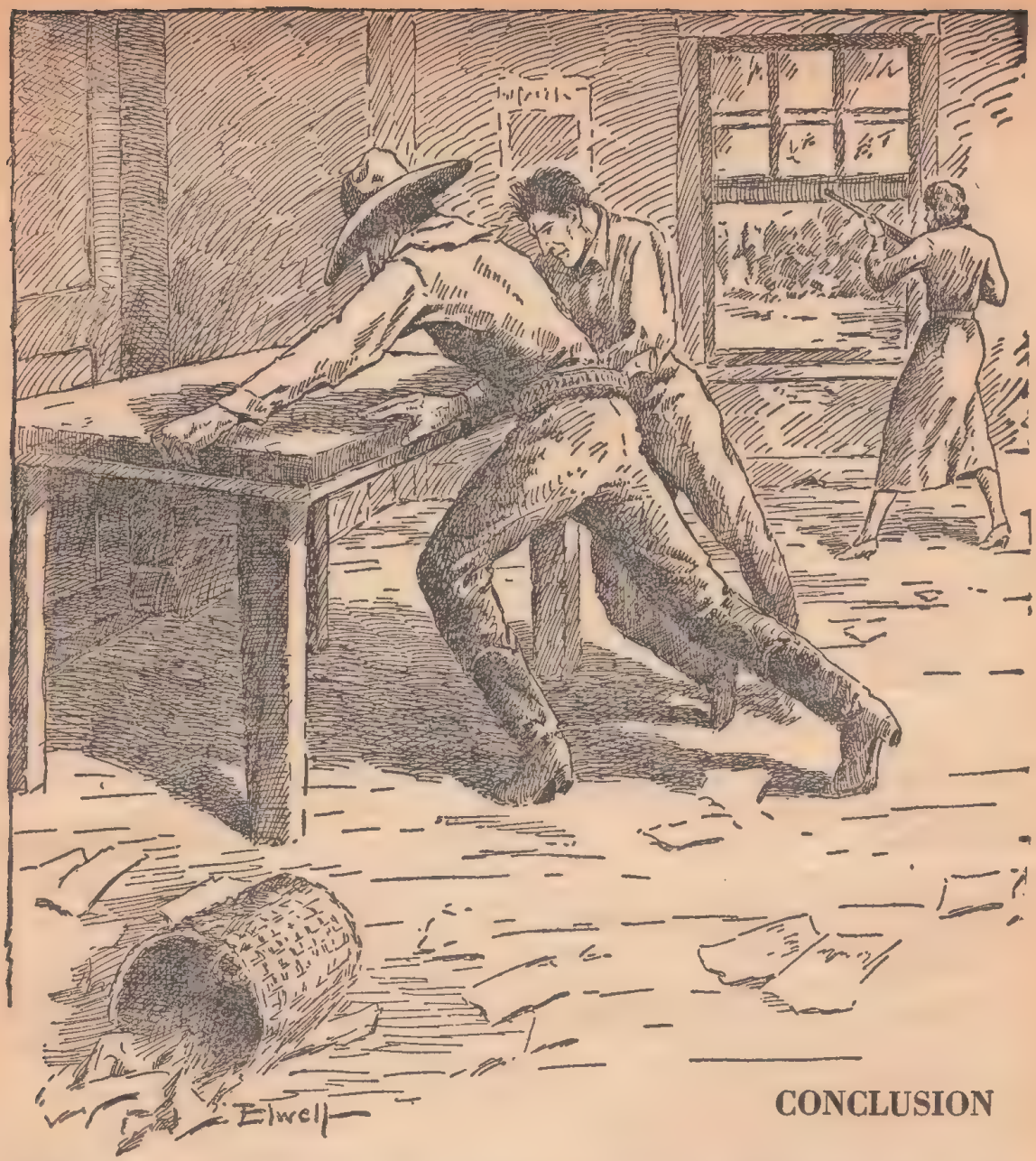
Dal Riley unlocked that bottom drawer, yanked out the worn old wanted poster and ripped it into shreds. There was a bottle in that drawer. He hauled it out.

"I wasn't but about one minute from hell all this time," he exclaimed.

"You was closer than that, taking so long to draw your gun," Kuraine advised. "But even a second from hell don't hurt, if you stay *this* side of it!"

They lifted their glasses. Big glasses, plumb full. And they drank a silent toast to the past, the present, the bright future.

Desperation's dark clouds were lost on the horizon. Dal Riley might have been but a minute from hell a while ago. He was but a second, or maybe less, from Heaven now.



CONCLUSION

RED CLARK ON THE BORDER

By GORDON YOUNG

Author of Many Stories of That Fighting Hellion, Red Clark

CHAPTER XIV

PREPARING FOR A SIEGE

AMA wanted to talk to Red about what they would do if Jim Suack came along; and he said bitterly to himself, "All she wants of me is to make her a rich widder!"

It never entered her small head that Red could hate her. She believed, and was not far wrong as far as her own personal experiences went, that men were much alike; some were handsomer than others, had more money, but all could be wrapped about a pretty woman's little finger. Ama did not have brains enough to be far-sighted and cautious in her planning; she

It Was Red's Opinion That You Can't Be Too Suspicious When You Monkey with Snakes, Polecats or Fellers That Ought to Be Hung

swung to fluttering impulses, was easily frightened, and as easily made heedless, blindly reckless. Oddly enough the man she loved best of all she had known was the cold, bland, secretive gambler. She thought him handsome; and perhaps just because she could not break through his iciness and make him act crazy about her, she acted crazy about him.

"Red, you won't let Jim hurt me?"

"Nope."

"Red, Jim will blame me for letting you get those letters Joe Dick wrote him. I didn't let you, did I?"

"Nope."

"I told him you rode up to the window and poked in a gun where the glass is broken and made me open the door there at the ranchhouse. You don't mind my telling a little lie like that?"

"Nope."

"I had to tell him something! And you don't *hate* me, do you, Red?"

"Let's get along faster. You, back there!" He turned toward Sam. "Hit that horse with your spurs!"

They went into a rocking chair lope. It was not easy to talk at a gallop, nor for her to keep so near Red's side. Her words came as if jolted out. "Red, you can't be sure, can you, about Matt and that Toynton girl?"

Red said, "She 'pears to like him mighty well, too!" He touched the sensitive Katy with his rowels, and the highbred insulted lady jumped in a way that almost pulled

Red's arm off for he held onto the rope that led Sam's horse.

Red reined up, faced about, talked to Sam.

"It don't make me happy to cuss a man that ain't got a gun and is, in a way of speakin', my pris'ner; but you slabsided hunk of maggot bait, you keep that horse up with me or I'll put this rope on your neck, cut your hobbles, and keep right on goin' whether or not your horse keeps up!"

Something less than three hours later they came clattering along the dusty street of Juilos, and it was again about midnight and again the Eldorado's windows were lighted; but there was no crowd, only Zee Hill in shirt sleeves, with inky fingers and a fresh sack of tobacco in the fingers as he rolled a cigarette. An empty whisky glass was on the bar.

Mr. Jackson sat in a chair out in front of the bar. His feet were propped on the chair in front of him, the corn cob pipe lay on its side on the table with a thimbleful of ashes spilled from the bowl.

Hill heard the horses stop outside, twisted one side of his mouth. "Must be our posse is back, Dad."

Mr. Jackson grunted and reached toward his pipe.

Ama rushed in first, through the wide door, stopped, looked all about. "Where is Matt? Where is—"

Hill spilled tobacco from his paper. Mr. Jackson took his feet off the table.

Then in came Sam Suack shambling with hangdog look and anxious slither of glance about the dance hall.

Hill threw away paper and tobacco, interested. Mr. Jackson, his small bright eyes growing wider, put down his pipe and stood up.

Right behind Sam came Red with dragging clash of rowels.

"All right, Dad! Get out your shotgun an' let's have some more truth tellin'!"

"You come from La Rez, son?" Mr. Jackson's voice rumbled.

"From La Rez, Dad!" Red pointed at Sam. "Set down. Stay set! You don't get out of my sight again unless killed! An' listen, Dad. That fellow Glaine was over there. He chipped in and helped—more than helped! He made me promise—maybe you know why?—I'd turn Sam here over to you. There he is. And who the hell is Glaine?"

"Glaine?" Mr. Jackson rubbed his chin. "Glaine, son, is one hell of a good man for to have on your side!"

"I begin to figger thataway."

Hill, not caring whether or not he was seen, jumped up belly-down on the bar, wriggled, reached, got hold of the bar bottle, slid back and poured himself a tall drink.

Ama was tugging and talking to Mr. Jackson. He, bulky and unhurried, did not seem to notice as he studied Sam's loose-hung body that sat in the chair all a-sag as if the joints were broken.

Hill proclaimed to the ceiling in a mournful wail, "All this news and the paper is publishing on the front page a campaign speech he never delivered by the colonel! He's over there now writing and writing till my fingers got sore setting up words I never heard of before!"

"Matt," said Mr. Jackson, not even dropping his glance to Ama's uplifted face, "is up in his room—dyin'."

"Dying?"

"We all hope so," Hill chirped from over by the bar as he poured another drink.

Ama's look was the next thing to a dagger stab. No one saw it. Hill was trying to get his glass full to the brim. She ran from the door with legs thrashing the long skirt. Red caught at her arm.

"Here, no you don't! Jim'll—"

"Damn Jim!" She was savage as a little wild cat, looked murderously at Red, pulled loose, ran.

Red stood as if about to run after her.

Mr. Jackson asked, "What's all this, Red?"

"Jim 'll kill 'er!" He was still looking through the door.

"Why," Mr. Jackson inquired slowly. "Just why?"

"Oh, on account of some letters Joe Dick's been writin' to him that I got. He blames her, or will."

Hill let out a squawk and came stamping up. "You wh-hat?"

"Letters?" asked Mr. Jackson. "Him to Jim Suack?"

"Yeah. You bet! The last one is atellin' Jim to look out that there is a man down here snoopin'!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" said Hill and ran to the bar, caught up the half-filled bottle and glass, scooted back, bottle in one hand, glass in the other. "Oh give me the letters and—"

"Where are them letters, son?"

"Oh I hid 'em close by. But here is Sam. Now you get some truth out of him!"

MR. JACKSON, with no hurry, looked at the wretched fellow and spoke, "Sam, you are a dirty low stinkin' human bein', now, ain't you?" The question coaxed inflectionally, without anger.

Sam didn't want to say. He sagged some more, hid his face.

"Nobody believes Red done it. Nobody! They is some as pretend to. Sheriff Marcher an' Jim Suack and a lot of rag and bobtails. The Toyntons brought the bodies in. They have been laid out at the blacksmith's house. Folks all day has been goin' in, standin', lookin'. It's hard to believe you even had a hand in it, Sam, 'cause in some ways you have got a shape most near like a human bein'! How it come you tried to put the blame on Red thataway?"

"Matt Boland put him up to it!" said Red.

"And," Hill called out, pouring another drink, "that gambler had another dollar in his pocket—tails on both sides!" He downed the drink, and began to talk, got his face up close to Mr. Jackson's. Hill was excited, waved his hands:

"Dad! You listen, Dad! You get your old shotgun and we'll all march over to the *News* office and take charge. We'll get out a paper, We'll print it all! We'll print some of the colonel's letters instead of his damned campaign speech. We'll print Sam's confession. And about that gambler; what a paper! Niblo and I'll get it out—and won't it be a paper! You and Red 'll have to stand guard to keep us from being thrown out when Jim and them get back to town and find out what we're doing. Come on, Dad! Will you? Here, I'll get it!"

Hill went with a slightly tipsy and very joyous scamper for the gun, came back, thrust it into Mr. Jackson's hands.

Mr. Jackson fingered his bristly cheek, turned, looked toward the bar, at the shelf of bottles behind the bar. He drew a deep breath. "I don't know but what that would be a right proper way for to get the facts out where people can look at 'em. Anyhow, it won't do no harm to go over and talk to the colonel some." He broke the gun, reached into his pocket, brought out shells, slipped them into the chambers. "All right, Sam. Head toward the door!"

Red took a drink of whisky, swiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Say, Dad, listen. I ain't et much of anything for two days. Nearer three, by gosh! I wouldn't stop for a little thing like eatin' to miss the fun in the print shop yonder, but do you reckon for a dollar Whitey'll fetch over somethin'?"

"'Course. Tell him I said to bring ever'thing he's got. Jim Suack an' his bunch 'll be bustin' in here when they find out—oh well."

Red ran to the back, made a big clatter in the darkness. "Hi, Whitey?"

Whitey slept on a pallet in the kitchen, cooked for the girls, was porter and handy man. He roused up good naturedly.

"Whitey, bring a little of ever'thing you've got to eat over to the print shop!"

"Print shop?"

"Print shop! Big basketful, will you?"

"Sho'!"

"Hi, then take Pete Jones' Katy down to the stable. She's out front. An' listen. 'F you got a piece of bread handy, I'll just take it along right now to wake my stomick up so it'll be all ready."

Whitey put a match to a lamp.

Red grabbed the best part of a half of a loaf, ran back to where Mr. Jackson waited with Sam under his eye at the door.

Hill was blowing out the lamps. Red ate bread as if it were cake.

Hill had a newspaper man's thoughtfulness even when hurried and stuck a bottle of whisky in each trousers' pocket. He followed Red out, closed the door, snapped the padlock.

It was dark and still in the town though stars burned like faintly ruffled bright-pointed candle-flames in the sky, and a translucent blue-black haze covered the earth. Buildings and trees were blots of deeper blackness.

In the small town were four lighted windows. One in the kitchen of the Eldorado where Whitey was preparing a basket. There was another at the print shop where the bowed life-beaten weak-chinned Niblo fretted with inky fingers at

the type case; and, at the back of the room behind the press, Col. Joseph P. Dick humped himself at a table to get down on paper his rage that the incumbent drunken sheriff had permitted such an inhumanly diabolical atrocity as that perpetrated upon our noble fellow citizen, Bud Henderson, and his loving wife, flower of our Western valleys, whose perfidious dissolution by one they had harbored in hospitable confidence and affection had been accompanied by an infuriated mutilation comparable only to the fiendish rage of the infernal Apaches. The colonel could not pretend to hate the Suacks enough to venture to express doubt of Sam's story.

Another light glowed at the upstairs window where Matt Boland lay unconscious in bed and, dying, his pale face still wore the mask from behind which he had said what he pleased, planned as he liked.

The other lighted window was far off the town's main street in the blacksmith's house where two bodies lay under a sheet and the kindly wife of Blacky kept a lamp burning as if, as long as possible, to keep Bud and Hattie from the darkness that must come on the morrow in the grave.

NIBLO'S rabbit face looked around from the case. He held out the half filled stick as if offering it.

Zee Hill, not quite sober, said in a hushed eager voice, "Hi, Nib! Look."

There, following Hill, was Sam Suack, much like a wet dishrag on legs, big slow Mr. Jackson with the shotgun; the lanky Red, supposed to be a fugitive, nibbling bread, holding the dusty bundle of a knotted handkerchief and balancing a rifle taken from his saddle in the crook of his arm. He sniffed at the unfamiliar tangy smell of ink.

"Hi, Nib! Looky here, too!" Hill patted the bulging trouser pockets where quart bottles stuck up their necks, then he swept a lordly hand at the full galleys on the stone. "Start distributing, Nib. Fill the cases. We're going to get out a real paper! I'm going to write it."

Niblo opened his mouth, let it stay open, and his jaw moved in the soundless waggle of a stutterer as he speechlessly watched Mr. Jackson march Sam on back to where the colonel sat scrouged over at a table.

The colonel had the trance-like concentration that some writers attain, all hope for. He loved his own thoughts, clothed them in what he believed was beautiful

language. He looked up as if awakening from a nice dream as a deep voice rumbled:

"Colonel, me and Sam and Red here, we have come over to see about having a little piece put in the paper!"

The colonel screwed his head around. Apprehension and indignation gathered in his dark eyes. He saw Red munching a piece of crust and thoughtfully hitting his handkerchief bundle against the press to knock off the dust from under the New York Store's porch.

The colonel couldn't have been much more angry, much more frightened either; so he spoke cautiously. "What's the—the meaning of this?"

"Well, sir, Colonel, Sam here is a liar, ain't you, Sam?"

Sam snuffled a little, rubbed his long nose with a forearm, said nothing.

"Now we figger, "Old Jack went on, solemnly rumbling, "as how you, not havin' any use for them Suacks, you oughta sorta be willin' to print Sam's confession about the Hendersons in your paper."

The colonel got red in the face, hooked a crooked finger at his collar, but the collar was already loose and he still felt choked. He summoned his dignity, pointed with the end of the pen he still held at the shotgun. "A confession obtained under coercion is—is not trustworthy!" He could not keep his eyes off Red who stood with a bright impertinent interested look. "Justice, sir, should be permitted to take its course!"

"Plumb right," Red agreed heartily. "Me, I'm all in favor of pullin' that rag off Justice's eyes, and of takin' away them scales of hern in which she weighs which side has got the most money, and of givin' her a couple of six-shooters and lettin' her go to it!" He slapped down the handkerchief bundle. "There then are some *unburned* letters I found down at Jim Suack's ranch under the bed. Wanta see 'em?"

The colonel jumped from his chair just about as if Red had planked down a coiled rattlesnake. He stood unsteadily, looked confused, still held the writing pen.

Everybody stood as silent as if praying. The colonel moved first; he reached out his hand to the bundle as if accepting a bargain. "I—I will publish the story exonerating you!" He drew the letters to him as if to pocket his pride.

Red snatched the bundle back, slapped them down on the table. "You let 'em be!"

"Then what was your purpose in—in bringing them to me?"

"Why," said Red with brightening look, "we're goin' to print 'em in your paper!"

"In—in m-my—" The colonel got his breath, threw back his head, and, as he had been instinctively doing all of his life, blustered, snapped a fist to his breast dramatically, "I'll defend my rights, sir, with my life. Only over my dead body can you befoul the pages of—"

"That'll suit me fine," Red told him. "You an' the Suacks and Matt Boland all chipped in to get Mendez to kill that Toynton boy, so your dead body is just about the suitablest thing we can have to—"

Ama Suack came in and began screaming. The easily startled Niblo pied a galley full of type on the floor. Hill quit trying to use his teeth as a corkscrew and nearly dropped the bottle. Ama looked, acted, sounded, as if she were pursued by Indians.

Behind her, on the run, came Whitey with his basket full of food. She had gone to the Eldorado, found it dark, seen the light in the back room, learned from Whitey where to find Red and Old Jack; and Whitey, curious and excited, for he could tell that she was one mad woman, hurried after her. She hadn't even known he was following, no more than she knew that the Eldorado girls, awakened by her yelling, and anxious not to miss the excitement were hastily dressing and coming too.

Ama clamored for Red. He stepped out, walked toward her with an air of caution,

expecting to have his hair pulled or worse. She knew by now that he had shot her gambler.

Mr. Jackson calmly put out his big stubby hand on the bundle of letters, fixed his small bright eyes on Joe Dick, spoke softly, "Red he's sorta excitable, 'pears like, so maybe you'd better get out the back way here. Needless to say, if I believed you had anything to do with the Toynton boy's death I wouldn't be lettin' you go—not without some holes in you!"

"But Jack, these letters—ruined. I'll be ruined if—"

"You oughta thought of that when you wrote 'em!"

Old Jack gave his head a backward jerk. The colonel went, leaving his long-tailed coat, absent-mindedly still carrying the writing pen.

AMA had Red backed up against a case of type and her hands were flying in angry gestures; but she wasn't angry at Red. She was shrieking, "—right! You were right! It is her! He loves her! Oh the—" Ama, from babyhood, had been around people who swore in Spanish and English, and in a temper she could repeat the worst of both tongues. "up there by his bed holding his hand, putting cold water on his head!" Most of the names she called Matt Boland were probably fitting, but they didn't sound right coming from her small pretty mouth.

Red sidled off, with far out-reach of hand dipped into the basket on Whitey's arm, took the first thing he laid hold on, a sandwich of cold ham, thick with mustard. He stretched his mouth, bit off about half of the sandwich, nodded in appreciation at Whitey, tried to say, "Good!" merely made a gurgling sound, very muffled.

Ama had rushed to the gambler, found Alice Toynton up there with some townsman's wife, both playing nurse. Dr. Rand had been called from town. Alice had been at the bedside, holding Matt Boland's hand when not dipping clothes into water, wringing them out, putting them on his forehead. Now in a frenzy of jealousy, Ama wanted to tell all she knew.

Hill, like the good newspaper man he was, even forgot his bottle of whisky and got up close to her, listened in an attitude as sympathetic as a big brother's. He asked brief adroit questions, got Ama into a chair, knew how to stir her up, make her wildly talkative when she seemed about to calm down.

Red took the basket away from Whitey, set it down on the stone, fished about, selected dill pickles, ate steadily, a bite of pickle with every bite of a sandwich.

Mr. Jackson, fat and solid, moved up closer, just near enough to hear well without intruding. He brought Sam, the letters, and the shotgun along. Old Jack was not absent-minded, could not be flustered, but he grunted solemnly as he heard Ama's story, suspected her of lying some, but guessed there was a lot of truth, too; and he began to have some doubts about the colonel's not knowing Will Toynton was going to be murdered.

Red saw a flitting of shadows at the dusty windows, leaned forward alertly, recognized the girls from the Eldorado, beckoned with full sweep of arm. Sue Max came first, then fat Dolly Varden, and Rose. They were, for a moment, oddly timid, eyed Old Jack as if expecting to be sent away; but they were in street clothes, knew better than to come out in town, even at night, in dance hall dresses.

THEY clustered about Red, asking questions in low eager voices. Sue Max stood closest to him. He could tell without looking when she spoke because her voice was husky as if she ought to clear her throat.

"Have a sandwich!" said Red hospitably, as if on a picnic. "By rights they're yourn, I reckon anyhow." He remembered the colonel, looked all about. "Who let that feller get away?"

"He stepped out the back way," said Mr. Jackson.

"Well, I'm goin' to step out and fetch him back!"

Mr. Jackson said, "Wait!" Red stopped. Mr. Jackson came close, in a very low voice explained, "He'll hang himself with his tongue. You'll see. 'Sides, you can't find 'im, most likely. He's busy stirrin' up trouble. If I'd known what I know now—or leastwise have just been hearin' — I don't think I'd let him go. But as 'tis, son, we've dealt ourselves purt-near all the aces. So set tight!"

Red reached into the basket, brought up a can of peaches, looked for a can opener, but Whitey had neglected to put one in. Red took out his knife. "I'd bite anybody as said you wasn't smarter'n me, so I don't want to act like I thought I was." At that, Sue patted his shoulder. "But you oughtn't 've let him get away!"

Red worked to cut out the top of the can, bent back the lid, fished out a half peach with the knife blade, opened his mouth, dropped in the peach, chewed with a contented look.

"There is just one ace we're a little shy, son," said Mr. Jackson.

"We purt-near got the pack. So let's fish out that ace too. What is it?"

"The colonel can't roust us out. Won't try except maybe by talk. But Jim Suack, he'll shoot!"

"Mighty good peaches, Dad. Have one?" He turned, offering a half peach to Sue.

She opened her mouth, then drew back. "No, I won't let you see how big my mouth is!"

Jack rumbled. "Listen, you kid! Jim'll most likely have brought in some men from the hill camps. Bad uns. They'll be ridin' with Sheriff Marcher when they most likely—some of 'em—have got rewards on their heads. We maybe ought to be prepared for what they call a siege, and have some boards or something to nail up on the winders. This paper ain't goin' to be out for quite some hours, I'm afraid." He looked aside at the nervous Niblo. "The way this fellow is spillin' type over the floor. Now I was thinkin' maybe it would be a good idee to get hold of Cohen of the Boston Store and sorta get some shells. Some shotgun shells for me. Some rifle for you. And .45s. Some nails and a saw and a hatchet."

Red ran a hand down into his pocket. "I ain't got me much money left, but—"

"I ain't neither with me," said Mr. Jackson. "Cohen ain't likely to want to give credit, neither. He finds the people he gives credit to then go spend their cash with Hopner at the New York."

Sue Max said, "I've got money!" She stopped, up came her skirt, down went her hand under her garter into the stocking. She unhooked a leg purse, the garter snapped, and she proudly offered a small purse weighted with gold pieces.

"If we can just borror a little," said Mr. Jackson.

"Borrow hell!" Sue Max's voice was a little huskier than usual, more emphatic, too. "I've worked dance halls from K.C. to the Coast. You're the only man running 'em that ever gives a girl a chance to keep enough to feel decent. I'd rob a church for a dollar if you needed it, Dad!"

"That's mighty nice of you, honey. All right, Red. Take about twenty dollars. Nails, hatchet, saw. And plenty of shells. Better hurry, 'cause this town's most likely goin' to be like an overturned hornet's nest 'long toward sunup. Sure to be when the Suacks ride in. Jim 'ud purt-near cut off his ears for this dog-nosed brother of his. I sorta wonder why?"

Red drank peach juice; paused, "Where's the Boston store feller live?" and went on drinking.

"Back of his store."

"I'll go with you," said Sue Max.

THEY went the back way. Sue held up her long-skirted street dress with one hand, held to Red's hand with the other. Red felt a little surprised at how

young-girlish she laughed when he knew, or was willing to bet, she was an old woman almost, up to near thirty, or even more.

"Red, is that Suack woman telling the truth?"

"Gosh, I don't know."

"Red, honest to God, I'm shame of myself because I really liked Matt Boland a little. I thought he was an honest gambler—"

"No such animal."

"—till Zee Hill showed me those two dollars! You don't think that little Toynton girl really loves him?"

"I don't know nothin' about who you women love. Maybe she just thinks he is a nice man, too. Only there was a mighty nice man right under her nose all the time down to the ranch. Pat Dugan. Did Hill tell you why I shot Matt?"

"Zee said he heard you quarreling and—"

"I didn't quarrel. I just told him some things!"

"—he didn't hear much of what was said."

"Anyhow, she must know by this time about his dollars, and if she wants to hold his hand after that; all right, let 'er!"

"You like her, don't you, Red?" There was a kind of softness in Sue's husky voice, as if she approved.

"She's purty. She's nice. She's got a temper which is all right, only she ain't got downright spunk and grit! They's a weak streak in them Toyntons and I don't like that. No sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? I don't know exactly myself. Only it's like I say. Bill Toynton's a fine feller, from all I hear—someways, maybe. He must've been brave as all-get-out to come in here with a herd when he did. But he sorta caved in when he was hit in the belly. He let fellers put things over on 'im! He let that Joe Dick and them Suacks make him scairt to do what he knowed was right. Like fightin' back. He took that Mendez in and was good to him when he knowed Mendez ourta been shot—even thought he didn't steal Toynton cows. That's why little cowmen was robbed and killed, fools like Hattie and Bud! He just set tight and felt bad. I don't wish none of them Toyntons any bad luck, but me, I'd hate like hell to ride for a man like that! And I shore wish Old Jack had him some cows!"

"He's the best man that ever lived!" said Sue Max.

The little Jew merchant was roused by a tremendous clatter against the back door, and he came to the door in a night gown with a candle in one hand, a big revolver that he couldn't have hit the broad side of a barn with in the other; but he didn't know that, having never shot a revolver. He did not open the door, but called out:

"Vat you want und why you are wantin' id? Und who are you?"

"We wanta buy some stuff!"

"You want puy somethins this dime of night?"

Sue Max said, "It's for Mr. Jackson, Mr. Cohen!"

"Oh, a voman uh? Who are you?"

"Sue Max," said Red. "Me an' Mr. Jackson have sorta taken over the paper an' need some things to—"

"Vat's 'at? You half bought the colonel's paper?"

"We're sorta borrorin' it, like. We need some things to get it out!"

Mr. Cohen took the bar off his back door but still had a chain on it. He opened the door the four inches the chain permitted, held his big revolver in his small hand,

raised the candle. Sue Max put in her hand, unhooked the chain before the merchant could stop her. He squeaked, "But I aind't got my clothes yed on!"

The nightgown was short, his short spindling legs were hairy, and he was flat-footed. Sue Max said in the tone she used to get a man to buy her a drink, "You look cute!" Red said, "You bet!" Mr. Cohen grinned sheepishly. "I don' feel coot. Now vat is id you want, hm?"

They returned to the print shop with arms loaded and went in the back way.

MR. JACKSON had pulled the colonel's editorial chair around in front of the press and sat there with an air of benign placidity, the shotgun on his knee. Two bottles of whiskey, one not now full, stood under his chair. Sam Suack was scrouged down on the floor, his back to the wall, his hands tied behind him with binding twine.

Ama had nearly fainted, or pretended so. Hill gave her a generous slug of whiskey in the long handled dipper from the water bucket. She was still talking. The somewhat more than plump Dolly Varden and the pale pink Rose were listening, just as wide-eyed and fascinated as little school girls who had never been out alone on the street after dark. Their lives, they felt, had been dull, flat, unadventurous. Here and there a man or two had had a fist fight on account of them; oftener than not the man they liked best had been licked; but Ama had lived in romantic excitement; at least as she told it.

The nervous Niblo, somewhat revived by a drink of whiskey, distributed type at one case; Zee Hill's nimble fingers darted and dipped about the type boxes of the other case, his eye scarcely following his hand. His lips moved in silence, his eyes had the hazy blankness of a man deep in thought. Now and then his eyes cleared with a straight look at the stick as he slanted upside-down letters to the lamplight, reading what he had set. Hill was composing his story directly from the case. He wiped sweat from his forehead with inky fingers, left smudge marks; often hastily rubbed his fingers on a piece of alum, shook his long hair back out of his face. The galley on the stone grew by stickfuls.

Red and Sue dropped nails, saw, hatchet on the floor beside Mr. Jackson, did not drop the heavier weight of cartridges.

"Here you, Whitey!" Red called. "Come along!"

"Yasuh!"

They scurried out and across the street to the long hitch-rack before the New York Store. Sue Max, holding her long skirt in both hands, the better to keep up, followed. Red used the heavy hatchet, knocked off the poles, one after the other, gave the hatchet to Sue to carry. He and Whitey made three trips, carrying poles back behind the print shop.

Whitey used the saw. It was a carpenter's saw, not a buck saw. Red chopped with the heavy hatchet. They cut the poles into lengths to barricade the print shop windows; decided they did not have enough poles and went on a raid down the street, came back with two more that were long and heavy.

"I helped build corrals in my time," said Red, "though much as I allus could, I let other fellers do the work. I'm forethoughtful thataway about work. Now what?"

Sue Max was calling from the back door. "Red! Red, Bill Toynton is here and begging Jack not to do it!"

"Gosh A'mighty, why don't folks mind their own business?" Red started, turned about, told Whitey, "You keep acarryin' in these pieces!"

BILL TOYNTON had asked for a little private talk with Mr. Jackson; and Old Jack said, "I don't see as how, Bill, we can have it much privater than 'tis. But you can talk as low as you like."

Toynton was broad shouldered, haggard-faced, earnest. He had been roused

from bed, he said, and sent by the colonel as a peacemaker.

"You an' me have been good friends, Jack. I'm goin' to be ruined if—the colonel, he knows things I've tried to keep hid—it's not me so much as my wife—if she knows, it'll kill her."

Ama Suack laughed. She had come up close to listen. Others hovered near. Mr. Toynton, at being laughed at, looked about with hurt troubled eyes. He knew Ama wasn't much good but they had always been friendly.

Zee Hill combed back his loose hair with long inky fingers and smiled out of one side of his mouth. Mr. Jackson spoke with a kind of sympathy in his deep voice, "I reckon you've been about as big a fool as ever lived, Bill!"

Hill poked Mr. Toynton's arm, making him look around. "We haven't time or space to put much of anything in the paper about you. Only about how your boy was man enough to hate how this country was being run, and you overrun by Joe Dick; so he wrote some letters to people. That's why your boy was murdered! We know Matt Boland planned it because he got her"—he pointed at Ama "—to make Mendez jealous. So likely your Joe Dick was in on it too. The Suacks were!"

Mr. Toynton couldn't speak. He merely heard and stood like stone. Then he put out a hand and leaned against the wall, settling up close against it as if his legs were weak.

It was then Red spoke up, respectful and hurried. "By happenso, with what she's said—" he jerked a thumb backwards toward Ama—"and what's been learned here an' there, the facts about you, Mr. Toynton, they are that you let a gambler and a wind bag in a long tailed coat bluff you clear outa your common sense. The gambler, bein' smart, he kept in the back and made Joe Dick strut. The gambler knowed you'd hate Joe Dick even if you was too scairt not to do like he said."

Mr. Toynton looked at Red with stare much like that of a trapped animal watching the hunter making ready to shoot.

"It 'pears, Mr. Toynton, that durin' the last Pachy raid you was reckernized by an old feller as knew what they once had agin you back in Missouri; wasn't you?"

Bill Toynton set his mouth grimly, and nodded.

"Tha 'Paches cut him up purty good, no more'n he deserved, most like. But he got back to town," Red went on, "and from how you had acted scairt about meetin' him, he thought he'd struck it rich. So he talked to the gambler, and a little while after that he died. Maybe the gambler helped him die. I wouldn't be surprised. Anyhow, this Boland he talked it over with Joe Dick. Joe Dick and him figgered they could scare you good, and keep you scairt. The gambler, like I said, he was smart enough to let Joe Dick do all the talkin'. And Joe Dick he made you think the fam'ly of the man you killed back in Missouri—for which you was to be hung—was still lookin' for you. That right?"

Mr. Toynton didn't say anything and he didn't make a move; but he was admitting it just the same.

"The joke it is, Mr. Toynton, that the gambler did go back to Missouri and try to find out about things, but there wasn't scarsely anybody as remembered you at all! But the colonel he made out there was still a big hunt on for you. Oh he was nice and soft and smooth about it, just like a man chokin' you to death—gently. And he made out that he had wrote all about what he knowed and sent it in a sealed envelope to a lawyer in Kansas City to be opened when he died. That was to keep you afraid to kill him! You, Mr. Toynton, you swallered it instead of takin' a blacksnake to him and rippin' off some hide under his pants. And you sold him cows for nothin', and you give him range and water you'd won from the 'Paches, and you backed him for sher'ff knowin' he was a no-good flea-bit lyin' stealin' windbag—an', personal, I think you knowed all along

there was a shenanegan 'tween him and the Suacks! What's more, too, you was goin' to give him your girl for a wife; but your boy, he had more grit than you or her. He up and said he'd be damned if he'd let his sister marry a feller like that —or like Matt Boland, either! You listenin' to me?"

Bill Toynton was listening with his head down, back to the wall; and his hand before his face shook.

"Me, I know for a fact Matt Boland wanted the colonel killed because he kept tryin' to get me mad enough at him to do it. Instead, I shot him for a little personal reason of my own.

"And," Red added with impassioned sincerity and rising voice, "I'll just bet right here and now that the whole trouble with you, Mr. Toynton, has been that you didn't do right that time when you killed the man back in Missouri and you oughta be hung for it! You know it, an' that's what's kept you scairt! If it had been a fair honest fight, you not been ashamed to have ever'body know. Ain't what I say, so?"

Mr. Toynton gazed up with as frightened a look as if Red held a knotted rope. He didn't say anything, but he wouldn't look at Red again. He stood as if he wanted to say something but couldn't think of the words. He went tramping out like a blind bull, nearly knocked over one of the girls without seeming to see her, struck against a table and went on, bumped into the door, opened it, lurched out and left it open behind him.

Mr. Jackson solemnly stroked his cheek, spoke slowly. "It 'pears like, Red, maybe you did put your finger square on the sore spot Bill has tried to keep hid. Yes sir; Bill, not bein' by instinct a bad fellow at all, has let his conscience over-trouble 'im all these years. Too bad, 'cause Bill Toynton wasn't cut out to be anything but a first rate man. If he'd been no good and mean, the colonel wouldn't ever had been able to run that bluff on him." Mr. Jackson clucked and shook his head, regretfully.

Niblo dropped some type near Mr. Jackson's chair and in picking it up he got hold of the opened bottle, but he didn't make off with it because Hill caught him.

"Here," said Hill, "no you don't! That's to keep our courage up after the bullets start whistling. I have a feeling we're going to need it!"

Chapter XV

ONE PAPER GOES TO PRESS

IT WAS beginning to be dawn.

Red and Whitey worked hurriedly to complete their barricade at the front and back windows. There were no side windows; the walls were adobe. Red wasn't much of a woodsman, nothing of a carpenter, but he had a lot of spikes, plenty of logs, a sharp hatchet, and from the way he built up the barricade he seemed to think Jim Suack might bring along a cannon. Red said he could shoot a lot better when he felt safe.

He left some cracks on purpose to peek through, shoot through if necessary, though Mr. Jackson felt there wouldn't be much shooting when folks saw how well the print shop was protected. Some protection was required if they were to get out the paper, because anybody that took cover in the New York Store, or behind the cottonwood, could send in bullets that would come through the front window, go out of the back.

Mr. Jackson saw the dawn and told the girls they ought to go home. They said they didn't want to go. The way they said it meant that they would make a howl if they couldn't stay. They chattered in coaxing argument that they were safe now; and, in thinking what else to say by way of argument, they said they wouldn't be safe over in the Eldorado if the Suacks came and got mad at learning Mr. Jackson was holding Sam Suack and backing up Red who was supposed to be a fugitive.

Red said, "Me, I'm too lazy to make a good fugitive. I don't like runnin' well enough."

Mr. Jackson rubbed his short-bristled cheeks and nodded. After more thought, he said to the girls, "I reckon you are right, you kids, for onct. I was purty sure when I took my last look around over there just as I was leavin' that they'd wreck my place. It can't be helped none. But I was selfish enough not to think about you girls!"

So they jumped at Old Jack, hugged and patted him, rumpled his hair, said he was the most selfish man they had ever known. Dolly Varden told Hill to be sure to put a piece in the paper about what a mean selfish man Jack was. Sue Max said, "You just dare. They'll be three of us girls to scratch your eyes out!" Hill paused to say that an honest editor had to take some chances like that in the interest of telling the truth.

Everybody laughed a little just like it was a picnic.

Red looked into the empty basket and stated loud and clear that he was hungry again. Whitey thought that if the Suacks were going to raid the Eldorado it would be proper to lug over more food. "And whiskey!" Hill told him. He took the basket and started, but as soon as Red opened the back door there was Pete Jones getting off Katy.

He had seen her at the hitch-rack before the Eldorado and rode over in a hurry on his way to the corral. He wasn't even through the back door before he said, "Hell's sure popped! The colonel's just killed Bill Toynton over at the 'Change House!"

"Me," said Red, "I'm goin' right out an' get me a dead colonel for to bury!"

He started, but Pete Jones took hold of his arm. "No use, Red. The colonel lit out south. An' what all you damn fools doin' here anyhow?" Pete looked around, interested. All the girls being there seemed to make it some kind of fun. Then he said, "Red, you oughta took Katy down to the stable."

"I know it. I'm sorry. I purt-near love that girl! But I come in with Sam over there on the end of my rope an' stopped off. I was plumb forgetful, Pete."

"I sure hope they don't find out you brought Sam in behind my horse!"

"Everybody in town as knows is settin' right in here. I don't think nobody'll holler it out when the Suacks come."

"I'd better get down to the stable an' hide your saddle. But what is all this acomin' off, anyhow?"

"I can show you part of what is coming off," Zee Hill told him in the prideful glee of authorship. He put down the stick, wet some paper. Then he fixed the type in the galley, smeared some ink with a roller, laid wet paper over the type and pounded the paper lightly with a mallet. He pulled off the damp paper and gave it to Pete.

Pete started to read, his eyes started to pop, got wider and wider.

Zee Hill did not waste any space with big words. The lead began:

Joseph P. Dick, who is wrongly called Colonel and is running for Sheriff of this county, and Matt Boland, who fooled people into thinking he was an honest gambler and almost a gentleman, and Jim Suack, who used to be a little rustler and horse thief and is now a big one, have for years been secret friends and worked together with Juan Mendez the Mexican horse thief, rustler and outlaw. The three of them put Mendez up to murder young Will Toynton in the Eldorado about a month ago. This is how they did it and why:

Pete Jones let go of that galley proof as if it were a hot potato. He *whewed* and he cursed in a low astonished voice; and he said, admiringly though, that the devil would sure be to pay.

"You bet," Red told him. "And that ain't all. Sam here is going to tell how Matt Boland put him up to sayin' it was me killed the Hendersons—"

"Say!" Peter broke in, and almost sounded at first as if he had a little joke. "That Toynton girl an' Miz' Warman was up there nursin' Matt, you know. Dr. Rand said somebody ought. He died and they never knowed it till he turned frost-cold and got stiff. They was a rubbin' an' doctorin' a dead man! He's got a face that don't show nothin' anyhow. Well Miz' Warman she come squawkin' over to my house just now. That's how I come to get up so blame early. When I took Alice down to the 'Change House—well, it was shore tough on the poor girl! Pop and Barny was just carryin' Bill into the parler after the colonel shot 'im."

JIM SUACK and his bunch came to town.

There was a mess of them and a bad lot, mostly Border-jumpers, though some honest cowmen who didn't know much about Red, and believed what they were told about the Hendersons, were along.

Peg Leg, when he bolted from the ranch had made for the hills where some of Suack's men camped out. They had all bunched together and came down. Partly they were mad at Red and Pat Dugan, because these boys had the next thing to massacred the Suacks; and down in the bottom of their hearts, these bad men were a little frightened to have men like Red and Pat Dugan running loose and likely to ride down on them, any time, any place. They had tried to get their hands on Pat but he straddled a saddle and got off into rough country. They couldn't waste time following, mostly because Pat, having his rifle along, was willing to show that he was a good shot.

The so-called posse felt they had the world by the tail because they were riding behind a sheriff instead of some jumps, as usual, ahead of one.

Jim Suack was so mad he could bite nails. After he met up with Peg Leg down near Dale's Place and heard how Ama had talked, he acted clear crazy.

They hadn't been able to find any trace of Red, though people said they had seen him heading toward Dale's Place; so Suack and Sheriff Marcher had decided to come back up to Juilos. Some miles out they saw in the distance a hard-riding figure, hatless and coatless, that turned out to be Joe Dick. He was so frightened and

upset that he stuttered in a choked sort of way that sounded a little like a turkey gobbling.

Jim Suack and his men knew that Red had shot the gambler, but it was from Joe Dick now that they learned how much it looked as if the gambler had talked and told things.

Sam and Ama had been fetched back from La Rez. Red Clark did that. Both of them, according to the agitated colonel, were talking their heads off.

Old Jack and that Red Clark had run the colonel—so he said—out of his own print shop and were using his own paper to publish all the lies they could think of.

Bill Toynton, so the colonel said, had gone over to the print shop to talk to them and they had made him so mad against the colonel there wasn't anything to do but shoot Toynton just about as quick as he came away and opened his mouth. The colonel acted more sorrowful than downright mad about Jim not having burned his letters. It was safer to act that way, because Jim wasn't in a mood to be blamed for anything.

Jim swelled up and cussed. He said it was all right about the letters because he would get them again if he had to tear down the print shop with his teeth; he said they would never get out a paper like they were planning; said he was going to fix Ama so she wouldn't do any more talk-

ing about him; said he was going to get Sam back alive and unhurt or make everybody that had touched him feel sorry; said that he had put up with all the highhanded foolishness from Old Jack that he was going to; that he would fill Red Clark so full of holes that the devil would have to use a pitchfork to handle the pieces.

He talked big and meant what he said, and it made him feel better to talk that way. The men cheered and whooped and Sheriff Marcher said they were all on the side of the law so whatever they did would be all right.

They came storming into Juilos, kicking up a lot of dust, yelling and shooting as they thought they could scare Old Jack and Red so bad they would walk right out with their hands up and asked not to be hurt.

They banged away at the print shop's windows as they rode by and around back; and the glass, as it splattered, looked just about like water was being splashed on it. They were mad at finding the windows had been barricaded.

Mr. Jackson wouldn't let Red shoot back. "They'll be plenty of time for that foolishness, son."

Ama Suack's face was twisted as if she wanted to cry and couldn't. She wedged herself in behind the iron-bellied stove. That looked like the safest place and she was so small and cat-like she could get there.

Zee Hill stopped setting type long enough to run up to the front and push the girls from a crack for a minute so he could see what was going on, then he went back, puckered his forehead, and worked as fast as he could to pull his story right out of the case.

Sue Max came up and asked, "Can't I do something to help?" She was so tense, eager, unafraid, that he couldn't take his eyes off her for a minute and wondered how it happened that he hadn't before noticed that Sue was a pretty girl even if she must be nearly as old as he was. He looked all about, and said, "Yes, Sue, you bet you can! You get Nib out from back there and keep him working!"

Niblo was down behind the press. Guns going off made him nervous and a little sick. He looked as if he were fixing to do some praying just as soon as he could get back enough of his wits to remember what words it was best to use when a fellow prayed. Then he squirmed around to see who was whacking him. He didn't think Sue Max's face was pretty. How she talked wasn't pretty either. She said that he ought to be ashamed of himself. He wasn't ashamed but he was scared of her. She poked and whacked with a printer's rule until Niblo felt it was better to take the chance of being hit by the splatter of a bullet than to have his eyes poked out by this crazy girl.

THE wildest of the Suacks soon thought it wasn't much fun to whoop and ride when nobody in the print shop paid any attention to them. Besides, they were hungry. They began to scatter about, looking for breakfast, and soon began to act as if they owned the town. Somebody broke into the Eldorado; others followed. It was fine to be on the side of law and order.

Jim Suack and the colonel and Sheriff Marcher and little Hopner of the New York Store, and some of the citizens who were more curious than in favor of the Suacks, put their heads together and talked a lot. Some other citizens noticed how strange that Joe Dick and Jim Suack seemed all of a sudden to have become close friends.

Sheriff Marcher said he reckoned that they ought to demand in the name of law and order that Red and Old Jack give themselves up; at least Red, for there was a warrant out for him. After that, it would be their own lookout what happened to them.

Marcher took a couple of drinks from a bottle Hopner fetched, straightened him-

self so as to look dignified and let people see how brave he was, tipped back his hat and walked out into the street before the print shop with his hand up, palm out.

He halloed. Nobody answered. Red said, "Let the old bull beller a while."

Nobody can feel comfortable and look dignified if he is shouting impressively and nobody seemed impressed enough to talk back. Right away Marcher began to notice that was a pretty hot morning, was going to be a scorching day. He kept his arm up, but used the other hand to get out a handkerchief and wipe his brow; then yelled, "Hey, you Jack, I'm talkin' to you!"

Nobody answered. The silence made Marcher uneasy. He wondered if they might not shoot all of a sudden; but there he was out in the middle of the street with lots of people looking at him. He tried again, "In the name of the law, I call on you fellers to sur-rend-der!"

Somebody off back among those watching yelled, "You ain't talkin' loud enough, Sheriff!" "Go up a little closter!" said somebody else. Others also began to say things.

Jim Suack did not like the way people were talking. This was a mighty serious affair for him. He had taken cover behind the cottonwood, just to be on the safe side in case some shooting started, and he yelled, "This ain't no laughin' matter." He called the hecklers bad names, and they shut up.

The front door opened, suddenly. Marcher jumped a little and flung up both hands. He was looking right into Red's rifle.

Red said, "You old galoot, you. Come right along in here. We'll talk to you, then you can go back an' tell 'em what we've said!"

Men were yelling that they ought to take a shot at Red, but there wasn't much of him in sight, and nobody was in a hurry to do it because they could see that he had shifted the muzzle of that rifle a little, and it was bearing on the group out in front of the New York. Also Marcher twisted around and yelled behind him, "Don't shoot, boys! For God's sake, don't shoot!"

THEN he went right on from the middle of the street to the print shop. He did not run but he walked fast as if in a hurry to be somewhere under cover.

Red closed the door and pushed him to one side. Then bullets began to slap into the door and into the windows. Some men out there were saying Marcher had betrayed them; and some that he had been captured, like the old fool that he was. There was much noise, the loudest of it from such fellows as had started drinking on empty stomachs.

Marcher wiped the sweat off his red face and blinked. After being out in the bright sun, the print shop seemed dark; and was with the windows almost blocked up. Hill had a lamp burning over his case.

Mr. Jackson talked to the sheriff in a calm rumble. "Marcher, you are bein' seven kinds of a damn fool. You either believe, or you don't, that this boy done what they say over to Henderson's. If you do, then you ain't got the brains God give a goose. If you don't, then you got even less for throwin' in with that bunch of Border-jumpers. Now here's Sam hisself. Sam, you up and tell the sheriff the truth!"

Sam was on the floor with his back to the wall, his hands behind him. He didn't want to talk. His brother was out there with a lot of men. But Sam saw how that ten gauge shotgun of Mr. Jackson's was, perhaps accidentally, pointing down across Mr. Jackson's elbow and Mr. Jackson's small bright eyes were squinting hard.

Sam slavered a little and gulped, but he said, "It was Crow and Paine and that Harve done it! Honest, I tried to stop 'em, but—but they was crazy mad!"

"Now," Mr. Jackson instructed, "you tell the sheriff here how you come to accuse Red!"

"M-Matt Boland there at Dale's, he told me to say it. He—he said Red was sure goin' to be killed down at our ranch if he rode in and—and—"

"So," said Mr. Jackson, shifting the shotgun and appealing to the sheriff, "there you are! You're out to arrest Red on Sam's say-so; and Sam denies it. Now what you goin' to do?"

Marcher wiped his red face again and asked if he could have a drink of water. Red told Whitey to bring some water. Marcher said, "Thankee," and drank. He wiped his mouth with the wadded bandana, then around the back of his neck. He cleared his throat, tried to look judicial.

"Well, sir, they is a warrant out an' if this boy ain't guilty he oughtn't be scairt to go into court—"

"How near a court do you think he'd ever get with that bunch out there?" asked Old Jack.

Marcher said, "But if I give my word as to how I'll protect him an' see—"

"You've give your word to enforce law in this country an' arrest them as need it, yet one out of ever' five men out there is on the dodge and you know it. Maybe Red'll come out and surrender if you round up them out there that you know ought to be rounded up!"

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Jack. They're fightin' mad! They'd kill me!"

"An' if Red let you arrest him, they'd kill him, too. Zee, do you think the sheriff could have some of them proofs to take out and show what kind of paper we are aimin' to get out purty soon?"

"Sure thing he can! Nib, pull some proofs for the sheriff!"

"You can read 'em when you get outside," Mr. Jackson told him. "Pass 'em around to the boys. I reckon, Red, we'd better let him out the back way."

Red peered through the back window. Nobody was in sight. He opened the door and Marcher went out with his hand holding the fluttering proofs high in the air. He seemed somehow to feel that would help keep him from being shot by mistake, or maybe he was trying to pretend that he had got something he wanted from his enforced visit in the print shop.

IN A MINUTE he was seen and men came running to hear what he had to say. They got hold of the proofs and many tried to read at once. In the scramble the damp paper was torn, but anybody who got hold of a piece found something to interest him. Hill was not mincing words in putting down his story. There were plenty among the men who were maliciously glad to show their scraps of galley proof to Jim and the colonel.

The colonel wasn't at all like himself any more. He looked peaked and wasn't talkative. Usually he could make a big speech about a dog fight.

Jim could not get any madder than he was, so all he could do was to get noisier. He swore and waved his arms, tore up the scraps of paper that he got his hands on and stamped on the pieces. He wished to God that he had a cannon. He wished that he had a barrel of gunpowder. He wished that the print shop wasn't adobe so it could be burned down. He roared for men to shoot and keep on shooting, and he emptied his revolver at the print shop.

A rifle smoked between a post crack in the front window and men who weren't already out of the line of fire hunted cover in a hurry. Mostly they ran to the right and left, placing themselves out of range.

A good deal of shooting went on, and much of it from the print shop.

It was a hot day and very hot in the print shop. Everybody was sweating. Dolly Varden and Rose both had headaches and felt so frazzled they wanted to cry, but didn't. Ama Suack did. She was frightened by what all she had told, and this looked to her just about like being in

prison, a prison where none of the men seemed to think she was a pretty, abused girl. Sam started to blubber and ask for water. They wouldn't give it to him. There was only about a half bucketful left for everybody.

Sue Max's black hair had been shaken down from so much bobbing about and in hastily sticking it up again she did not get it smooth or tightly pinned. She kept slapping at her hair, then suddenly yanked out what looked like a big handful and threw it on the floor. It was her thick switch. Sue said, "To hell with it! I don't care what I look like!" She didn't have a headache. Much of the time she had Red's rifle and stood by a crack hoping for a chance to shoot. She couldn't hit a cow across the street but she liked trying. She said it was the first time in her life that she ever had a chance to do what she wanted to men.

Red kept his eye out of the back window and did a lot of talking to Whitey about having forgot to bring in more food, like he promised. Whitey could not tell whether Red was really peevish or just pretending.

Hill was so smeared with inky sweat that Mr. Jackson said it took two looks to tell that he wasn't Whitey's brother.

"How much longer it goin' to take you, Zee?" Old Jack asked.

"About two hours, Jack."

Dolly Varden moaned, "Two hours! I want sweet peas put in my hand in my coffin!"

Red called out, "But how we goin' to scatter our papers when we get 'em printed?"

"Don't worry," said Mr. Jackson. "Word of what's goin' on here will get to La Rez and folks will come. I have already sorta been expectin' people."

Red yapped back, "You must be goin' a little crazy, Dad. They ain't been time enough yet for anybody to get there an' back!"

"Little boys of about your size don't know ever'thing," said Old Jack cryptically, and chuckled.

"I know how fast horses can travel—knowed when I wasn't half my present handsome size."

Chapter XVI

FLAG OF TRUCE

SUE MAX said, "Little Hopner's out there with a white rag on a stick. He's yelling something."

"Shoot off his hat!" Red told her.

"He's not got his hat on!"

Mr. Jackson walked toward the front. "Hop's not a bad fellow. I reckon they wanta talk."

"Whitey!" Red caught the black boy, gave him a push. "You get up here an' keep your eye out back. Maybe it's a trick so we won't watch close on all sides. Me, I wanta see how bad Hopner is scairt. If he ain't proper scairt, I'll do a little something about it!"

"Son!" Mr. Jackson sounded reproachful. "You wouldn't shoot at a flag of truce?"

"Well, they think we might, or they would have sent somebody else that they cared more about gettin' shot!"

"But a flag of truce?"

"Is most likely a rag on a stick with a liar under it!"

Little Hopner was edging forward, calling loudly, "Mr. Jackson! Mr. Jackson!"

Red pushed Mr. Jackson one way, Sue the other, yelled, "Old Jack's takin' a nap! Why you wanta wake him up like this for?"

"I—I got a message for Mr. Jackson!"

"Who from?"

"From J-Jim Suack!"

"What's happened to his tongue? Why don't he waltz right out here and speak his piece?"

"I wanta talk to Mr. Jackson, personal," Hopner squawked.

"Well, come on over and walk right in!"

Hopner was not yet in the middle of the street. He stopped where he was, stood as if listening. He was getting instructions from low voices that called softly to him from the shelter of the New York Store.

"J-Jim wants to know—" Hopner was lifting his voice shrilly to make it carry—

"if it is t-true that S-Sam killed—them Hendersons!"

Mr. Jackson squeezed hard against Red. "I'll talk to him."

Red snapped fiercely, "You won't! Can't you see they're lyin'? Don't ever do what people you don't trust want you to." He yelled back at Hopner, "An' if 'tis true?"

"J-Jim says he'll take his own brother right out and hang him!"

"Now you see," Mr. Jackson rumbled, "not even a man bad as Jim will put up with a thing like that from his own brother!"

Red spluttered angrily, "If I thought you think that I wouldn't think you're half as smart as I been thinkin'." To Hopner, "That there is fine! You go back and tell Jim that now we know how he feels, we feel it is all right to hang Sam ourselves in here. We got a nice rafter and some rope!"

RED'S voice carried far and clearly; and there was quite a commotion started among people who were listening. They called Hopner back and he went uneasily, holding up the white piece of rag that fluttered on the stick.

Also there was much chatter and fast talk in the print shop. Sue Max said, "It is a good thing that you are an honest boy, Red, because you can certainly lie when you want! Good as a woman!" Nobody paid any attention to her, or to Dolly and Rose, nor to Hill who talked as he locked up a form.

Mr. Jackson was speaking firmly, with reproach. "Red, you are a purty smart boy, some ways. But don't you reckon Jim Suack has figgered it out that he has got to switch sides because the whole country will be so riled agin him that he'll be drove out? He never believed you done it. Now he's got to pretend he's been convinced Sam done it. And it would purtnear be like him to hang Sam just to square himself with folks!"

Red looked a little humble, not much though, and admitted, "Maybe you are—no maybe about it. You are smarter than me. But even at that, I don't think you're smarter'n my dad. He said don't trust liars, *ever!*"

Another voice was hailing the print shop, a louder, stronger voice.

"That there is Jim," said Mr. Jackson and planted himself a crack.

Jim Suack was yelling, "Can I come out an' talk?" He was holding up the stick with the white rag from behind the cottonwood with not much more than the edge of his hat brim showing as he peeked.

"Come right on out, Jim!" Mr. Jackson called.

Jim stepped out into plain sight. He was a big rangy fellow with a big nose and bony eye sockets. He said, "I ain't armed." His hands were empty except for the stick and his holster was empty. He said, "Jack, you know how I've allus felt about you and I wanta talk ser'us."

"Then come right on over closter where we don't have to yell so loud!"

Red went to the back of the print shop and warned Whitey, "You keep your eye pealed out of that back window, there. I smell me a rat!"

Hill said, "Red, you are too suspicious."

"I ain't! You can't be too s'pic'us when you monkey with snakes, polecats or fellers that oughta be hung."

"Well Jim isn't a coward to be walking

right out over here like that!" Hill again left his work to go up to the front where he could see and listen.

Red started up front too, but gave a slantwise searching look at Sam Suack on the floor up against the wall, and something about the way Sam's eye glinted before it fell made Red wonder.

He went over, grabbed Sam by the shoulder, gave him a yank and Sam's untied hands came up in a quick desperate grapple.

The advantage was all Red's, and he used it promptly by drawing a gun and laying the barrel over Sam's head.

Sam rolled down sidewise as if suddenly asleep. The binding twine lay in sight. It hadn't been slipped off, but untied. Red's puzzled look went this way and that, settled on Ama Suack who was standing up behind the stove with a kind of terrified confession on her face.

He started in to cuss Ama but stopped, finished off in a perplexed vague mumble, "I reckon you can't help bein' just plain onery thataway!"

He dropped down with a knee on Sam's rump, snapped Sam's lax arms up in the small of his back, retied the wrists with a tight lashing and a half dozen hard knots. Then he glowered at Ama, "You monkey with that again an' I'll tie you up!"

Her small mouth opened in astonishment. "Why I never touched it!"

She looked, she spoke, just as if telling the truth, and her feelings were a little hurt at being accused.

Suddenly it seemed much lighter in the print shop. Red looked up front, saw the door was open. Jim Suack was standing right there in front of it with the stick on his shoulder, the white rag adroop behind him. Mr. Jackson had opened the door but did not step out. They stood face to face, and could have reached out and touched hands. Mr. Jackson had set his shotgun down with the muzzle against the wall.

Jim looked worn and cut up. He had buck teeth like Sam used to have, and they lifted his front lip in what looked like a smile. He said, "Jack, maybe in my time I've done some things that wasn't just right. But Jack, you know I'd never stand for a thing like that, not even from my own brother!"

Mr. Jackson rumbled politely, "I know how you feel, I reckon."

"Now if I can talk to this Red a little—"

Red, from about halfway back in the shop, called, "Just walk right in, feller! You can talk all you want!"

Jim didn't seem to hear. He stopped a second as if getting his words together, then, "Talk with him a little up here by you an'—"

Red snapped again, "Be better, wouldn't it, if you come in an' talk some with this dog-nosed rat-tailed brother of yourn!"

The girls reproachfully said, "Why, Red!"—"That's no way to act!"—"I'm ashamed of you, Red!"

Red stood where he was, frowned. Mr. Jackson turned with heavy slowness, spoke sharply, "Red, you are actin' like a spoilt baby. Now come up here!"

"Not me!" said Red, and leaned against the stone.

"Red!" Mr. Jackson's deep voice was stern.

Red yelled, *"Look out, Jack!"* and jumped aside with a gun coming from its holster.

Jim Suack, shadow-quick, had leaped away from the front of the open door, ducked down, dropping the flag in a quick lurch to get below the window.

Mr. Jackson didn't see that, but he knew what the shrill note in Red's voice meant. Mr. Jackson's brain was quick but his big body was slow. The front door opened inward. He shuffled in clumsy haste to get out of the way so he could close it. Guns snapped from the doors and windows of the New York Store across the street. Bullets smacked and splattered.

Some went through the shop, struck the back wall.

Mr. Jackson was so bulky that he filled the doorway. Red's gun was useless in his hand. He did not dare shoot. He jumped forward to shove the slow-moving Old Jack, but the heavy body toppled to one side, dropped heavily, face down.

Voices yelped from across the street, "We got 'im!"

Red's revolver went back into its holster. He caught up the shotgun, swung its muzzle into the open door, fired both barrels, splattering a double pattern of buckshot toward men who thought they had swept the print shop with lead, killed Jackson, others perhaps, perhaps even Red. The ten gauge roared. Some men were hit, many yelled. Red himself was knocked into a backward stagger by the kick of the gun.

Hill and the frantic Niblo swung the door shut by pushing hard to scrape it past Mr. Jackson's outstretched leg.

Sue Max and Dolly and Rose dropped to their knees on the floor. Their hands tugged futilely at the heavy body, implored, "Jack? Daddy Jack!"

Outside it was nearly quiet. Jim Suack's voice could be heard. "Well that worked! Now just shoot hell outa that door. We'll clean out the rest of 'em!"

The tall blonde Rose was praying. Dolly Varden wept. Sue Max cursed. Old Jack was dead, hit five or six times in the back.

IT WAS frightfully hot in the print shop. Powder stink and the inky smell and musty odor of paper made it hard to breath in the sultry air.

Red, lean and hard as a sun-dried pole, dripped sweat. There was no water. He smashed the full bottle of whiskey.

Niblo's trembling rabbit face was aquiver as he begged that they surrender. Hill knocked him down with the galley mallet.

There was a steady crack, crack, crack of guns at the front door and back door from men who had taken cover. Hill and Red ran the compositor's stone table to the front door, upset it, let the bullets smash through the wood, splatter against the stone. Hill locked up his last form on the floor.

Whitey had the shotgun at the back window, fired one barrel at a time when he saw anybody. His black face glistened with sweat and a kind of joy. Fierce men yelled that they would hang the damn nigger.

Sue Max used Red's rifle, stood up to shoot, shot at smoke. The kick of the rifle set her back on her heels, but she leaned forward, shot again and again. She could not see anybody to shoot at.

Everybody in town was out there, but safely off at the sides of the building, out of range. A pounding jar began at the side of the building. Men had got axes and were cutting through the wall. Red grabbed the hatchet, began to cut on the inside to meet the hole.

Whitey called, "They sho' got me!" and came with a broken arm. He looked at it curiously, took his left hand and moved the helpless arm. Pain would come later. "Think we all goin' to git outah he'h 'live?"

"No time to think," said Red. "'Sides—" whack went the hatchet "—ever'time I think—" whack "—I think wrong!" Whack, whack. "Bring me that shotgun!" Whack, whack!

Red took the shotgun, made sure it was loaded, waited until he saw daylight through the hole, shoved the gun out, fired one barrel, moved the muzzle a few inches, fired the other. Yells and curses followed. The buckshot had found flesh to bite into.

"That's the way I like to hear 'em talk!" said Red, loading and firing again.

He ran to the back, but things had quieted out there. Much noise was being made by men who had drunk heavily and banged away, but steady deadly marks-

manship and the courage to take chances in an organized assault was lacking.

Little Hopner was learning that the men considered him such a good friend that they thought it all right to take what they wanted from his shelves; and they had also raided the colonel's Longhorn Saloon. Weren't they making the fight for him?

Somebody, and a good marksman too, from cover began shooting steadily at the hole cut in the side of the building, splattering dirt and dust, smacking clear across the shop.

Red heaved the high-legged iron-bellied stove into a spinning turn on its legs. Down came some loosened joints of the stove pipe, scattering soot like a thick swarm of black insects; but the stove, when set close up against the hole, made good protection, but Red was covered with soot.

Hill had finally got his forms on the old hand press. He looked half dead with weariness, was still bright-eyed, feverish with the thrill of getting out the sort of paper that pleased him and under fire.

Sue Max's hair was down, her dress was half torn off from where she had pulled it at the shoulder to see why her shoulder was so sore, found it black and blue. Powder grime outlined her eyes, her mouth, her nostrils. She looked a fright; her eyes had a gleam of lunacy. They had shot in the back the one man that she had loved; that she loved him as a father, made no difference. It was love. She naturally had a savage streak. Bullets splattered and showered splinters about her. She did not even dodge. She kept the rifle barrel too hot to touch. The men outside thought a man was behind her gun.

Whitey was down on the floor, gripping his arm and moaning. Pain was eating on him, and fear too.

DRUNKEN men were whooping up and down the street, carefully keeping at angles free from the fire through the print shop windows. It was better fun to drink and roar and bang away aimlessly than to get out in line with the bullets that came at them on sight. No doubt of it, the bad bunch was getting out of hand.

Townsmen got Sheriff Marcher off among themselves and gave him hell. He had brought this bunch down upon them, and they were just about looting the town.

The sheriff wiped his red face, said, "Now, now boys, now boys! What can I do?"

Townsmen glowered and grumbled. They remembered how they had liked Old Jack. A queer old codger, but honest, unafraid. They spoke to themselves of how Red and Pat Dugan had pounced on the Suacks; and that seemed more admirable than ever now that this Suack bunch was taking charge of the town. But the townsmen, being townsmen, did not do much of anything about it except mutter curses and huddle together and feel pleased at the way the people in the print shop kept shooting.

The morning passed, noon came; it was hot.

Jim Suack knew that something would have to be done pretty soon or he was not going to win out. The men were getting drunker, more out of control, and making this one big spree instead of a fight. Jim did a lot of cussing in expressing wonder as to how it happened that the damn fools in the print shop didn't run out of ammunition.

Little Hopner swore that they didn't get any shells from him; little Cohen swore they had not got any from him. Somebody said, "Maybe the colonel had some cases in there to take down to his ranch?"

They began to look about to ask the colonel about it, but he could not be found. Inquiries did disclose that Colonel Joseph P. Dick had slipped off down to the corral, got his horse and left town. "I seen 'im headin' out along the Stage

Road toward the way to his ranch," said a man.

Jim Suack took a couple of stiff drinks, lit a cigar, and made his way around to the back of the print shop. Men knew that he was up to something. Jim was a foxy fellow. Look how he had got the best of Old Jack. Nobody ever got the best of Jim; not for long.

He stood up close against the rear wall and yelled, "Hey you, in there!"

Red cocked an ear. "Now what?"

"I got a prop'sition to make!"

Red said things to himself. Here was Jim Suack not three feet away, yet as safe as if three miles off. "Got another flag of truce with you?"

"If you let Sam and my wife come out unhurt, we'll leave you alone! We'll ride off and—"

"Go get another flag o' truce," Red jeered. "I'd like to kill you under it!"

"You better not try to be so damn smart, feller!"

Red looked about in a restless way, called Hill, "Zee, come here!"

"What you say?" Jim asked.

"I'm talkin' it over with folks in here!" Red told him.

"That's sens'ble!" Jim pulled the cigar from his mouth, spit, winked at some of the fellows that had come along and stood by to listen.

Red opened the shotgun, took a look to make sure he had live shells in the chambers. He whispered to Hill, "Open that door, cautious an' quick!"

Hill said, "No, no, no, Red! They're waitin' to shoot you!"

"A'right then, get outa my way!" Red struck with a push that almost threw Hill off his feet. He unsnapped the lock of the back door, jerked the door back and open, lunged through.

Men no more expected him to come out fighting than they expected the devil to pop right up out of the earth. He knew which side of the building Jim was on and swung the ten gauge, stumbled, half fell, caught himself on his knees, jerked both triggers.

Jim Suack had jumped, too startled even to squawk. The double-barreled roar of the shotgun had the sound of a small cannon; great gusts of smoke swirled out, spread a dense haze, melted away.

Jim Suack lay on the ground with one leg shattered just above the knee and the other leg was ripped to pieces. If he lived, he would go on stumps, more than half legless.

The kick of the ten gauge knocked Red clear back off his knees, but he scrambled like a cat, gave the gun a backward toss, butt first, that pitched it through the open door behind him. He got to his feet with a revolver blazing.

Red backed slowly into the print shop, shot fast. Hasty bullets snapped back at him; some didn't even hit the building; some splattered 'dobe dust all over him. Men had scurried, ducked, jumped, flung themselves as quail vanish into brush. Red emptied one revolver, took the other, kept on shooting at any far glimpse of anybody. Mad as he was, and as crazy reckless, he did not snap down on an empty chamber in either gun; but counted his shots. When both guns were empty, he stepped back, not hurried, shut the door, bolted it. His face was set in a savage grin.

Hill stared at him. "My God, I believe you like it!"

"Anytime I don't like shootin' men like them, I hope I get shot! An' I'm purt near gladder I hit him in the legs than in the heart where I meant to. While he's dyin' he can wish to God he hadn't played no trick on Old Jack!"

FOR a long time nobody dared go over to where Jim howled and used cuss words in praying for help. Men were not eager to come to him. He was too near the print shop, and that shotgun was a bad thing to monkey with, especially in the hands of a fool fellow who didn't appear to care much whether or not he was shot at if he could do some shooting. Anyhow, Jim Suack, crippled in both legs and surely dying, was not the Jim Suack who could give Border-jumpers shelter and employment.

"And nobody wants to forget," said Red, "that 'twas him offered them fellers a thousand dollars to sneak in on the Hendersons!"

Still, when a voice began to yell from behind the cottonwood, "Can we get a stretcher an' take Jim off?" Red said, "Go ahead!" but Sue Max spoke up. What she said wasn't lady-like, but most of what she said wasn't heard because she started shooting at the cottonwood. Old Jack was on the floor, right behind her, face down, and the tall pale Rose lay crumpled there, too, just about as if she were also dead.

Niblo began to whine about being sick and wanting to go out.

"Go on," Red said with a careless wave of an arm toward the door. "You'll take about one step, then folks'll be put to the trouble of diggin' a grave for you. Be a damn shaller un, though!"

A voice, loud enough to be heard clearly but with a subdued inflection, began to call through the hole in the side of the wall where the stove had been pushed. "Hey in there! This is Pete. Pete Jones!"

Red did not move the stove. "Well, what you want?"

"Red?"

"That's me."

"Old Marcher's feelin' mighty bad an'—"

"How much you think we care?"

"They all out here don't feel so good now, Red. You blowed Jim's legs purtnear clear off!"

"Old Jack's layin' here with holes in his back!" Red snapped.

"Red, if me and Blacky and Marcher an' some other fellers—you trust me, don't you Red? If we line up and march over, will you come out? We'll protect you good, Red."

"Just you point out, will you, in what way we ain't so far been able to protect ourselves—'cept for that damn rag on a stick with a Suack under it!"

"But Red, we all are for you an'—"

"When you fellers line up an' start shootin' at these onery two-legged lice, then we'll come out an' join in. No use, Pete. I think your intentions are all right, but I ain't overpowered with admiration for your grit!"

"But my God, Red, if I'd made a move before you got Jim, these fellers would have burned my stable an'—"

"Old Jack knew they was goin' to wreck his place. He didn't back down. Now you go off some'eres in the shade with Marcher and them an' play some mumbly pegs 'r somethin' about your all's size. This is a fight. It's goin' to be a fight as long as anybody out there wants a fight!"

"But Red, my God, you can't keep this up—"

"The hell we can't! We ain't got no water. We ain't got no food. We all got headaches an' Whitey's bad hurt. An' the stink from this live Suack we got in here is suffocatin'. But we've got lots of shells an' we've got out a paper that's goin' to blow this country wide open! Hey, Zee! Wad up one of them papers an' we'll poke it out to Pete. Now here, Pete. You get off an' stop playing mumbly pegs long enough to read it!"

Red shifted the stove a little, and Hill poked out the paper that he had folded and rolled tightly.

Hill said, "But Red, why can't we get out of here if they'll help us?"

"Even Sue Max said, "We can't stay in here forever. Red!"

Red looked from one to the other. His lean jaws were clamped down hard and the blue eyes glittered in his powder smudged face. "When you've got the winnin' hand, set tight. Don't go drawin' more cards. Soc'ably, Pete's a nice feller. But I ain't got no what you call faith in a feller that won't get in a fight to help you till you've won it by yourself! Now if it was Pat Dugan rode up out there an' said, 'Come on!' I'd pile outa here so fast you could hear me whiz! No, by God, don't ever surrender when you got the other feller licked!"

SUE and Hill began to listen with a faraway expression; and Red, too, heard some kind of new sounds. He made out the steady throbbing clatter of horses, rapidly coming nearer and nearer until there was a jangle and clash and rattle, very puzzling, for cowmen didn't make that kind of sound when they rode.

Sue Max ran up the front and screamed, "Soldiers! Soldiers!"

"You're goin' plumb crazy," Red told her and went up to the front, and peered through a crack. "An' me too, I reckon!"

There was the man Glaine and the boy Curly in the lead with an officer, followed by a troop of cavalry, four abreast. Brown hardened men, stiffly erect in the saddles. A bugle sounded. To Red there seemed a moment of confusion, loud orders, a flourish of arms from officers, and some of the cavalry rode on, trotting, but some stopped, faced toward the New York Store where people, many drunk but stupidly quiet, were clustering.

An officer faced them, lifted his hand high, pulled it down, began to read. The words were not clearly heard; but "—martial law declared in Juilos County—"

Glaine and Curly and Captain Halleck dismounted, came toward the print shop. The crowd from across the street started to surge after them, but there was the snap of orders, and three or four cavalrymen whirled their horses, drew sabres, blocked the way to the door.

Glaine stooped, picked up the stick with the white rag on it. The print shop door opened, but was still partly blocked by the compositor's stone. A lamp was burning with a flame barely distinguishable above the type case.

In the midst of the wreckage Old Jack lay on the floor, face down, red dabs where blood had oozed were on his back.

Glaine and Curly and Captain Halleck for a moment were blinded after the bright sunlight; they blinked and peered, were puzzled by the presence of the women.

Red stood as if a little drunken; he was that weary. Even his hair was black from the scattered soot of the loosened stove pipe and his face was nearly as black as Whitey's. Curly gasped; and with the amazed sound of one sure, but astounded, blurted, "You—Red? What on earth?"

Red swept his arm wearily at Sam Suack. "There's your damn prisoner, like I promised. Only I made me another mistake. I oughta shot 'im 'fore I let you fellers in!"

Captain Halleck, crisp, noncommittal, demanded, "What's the meaning of this?"

Red swept his arm again. "Show 'im, Zee."

Zee Hill in silence handed over a copy of the Juilos *News*. It was smudged; the paper had gone unevenly onto the forms; it was unfolded, too; but the story was there.

Red, unutterably weary, said, "They tried to keep us from gettin' it out. His voice snapped, "And didn't! She—" He swayed a hand toward Sue who was huddled back against the wall as if suddenly afraid and a little shamed of her naked bruised shoulder, wild hair, unwashed smudged face "—fought like a man. Damn good man! An' Zee here—they couldn't scare him. An' Whitey over there!" Red drew a deep breath, grinned, still as if a little drunken. "They licked all the bad

men Jim Suack could bring! That thing you've got there—" Red pointed at the rag on the stick Glaine held, then pointed at Mr. Jackson's body. "Jim Suack come over with it for a talk, got Old Jack to open the door. Jim, bein' a Suack, jumped aside—men opened fire. There he is. Old Jack." Red, stirred with suspicion, looked from Glaine to Captain Halleck. "Now what do you all think you're goin' to do? Let that sheriff arrest me?"

Glaine said quietly, "The sheriff isn't a sheriff any more. He has been removed from office."

Captain Halleck looked like a hard-bitten soldier, but he asked with an air of respect, "What do you advise, Glaine?"

The tall hard-faced dark Glaine said, "Round them all up out there. Herd them into the corral. When we get through sortin' them, we'll have enough bad ones to please half the sheriffs west of the Mississippi!"

Captain Halleck went out with brisk stride, drawing his sword as he stepped from the door, began to give orders.

Red grinned a little at Glaine, knew him for a friend, and welcome. "I'm tired. I'm sleepy." With sudden interest. "I'm hungry! Oh, yes, and I want a drink. We all want a drink. And you, just who the devil are you?"

"I?" Glaine stood tall and calm, hard eyed. "Nobody much. The Governor sent me over into this country as a sort of special investigator after, among a lot of other reports, he got a letter from young Will Toynton. The Governor wanted to know just how bad things were. I told him. It just happens that he is my brother-in-law. He got busy and got permission to send in cavalry. Came on the train to La Rez. And here we are! This boy," Glaine pushed Curly forward a little, "came along with me. Two men, one of them a kid, weren't so likely to be suspected of snooping when they showed up down around Suack's range. The Governor—he's Western born and raised—believes boys ought to get out and see the world. This youngster happens to be his son!"

"An' Old Jack knew all along?"

Glaine pitched the white rag and stick aside. "Yes. We are old friends. Before I left the last time I told him I hoped to come back with soldiers." He gazed down at Old Jack, then lifted his dark hard eyes. "And that gambler, Red. I'd cut his trail before. That's how I knew pretty much what to expect from him and"—he pointed at the half dead Ama who didn't hear, who didn't care, what anybody said —"and a woman like that!"

SOME twenty hours later Red woke up in a soft bed with sunlight at the windows and wondered where he was. He sat up, scratched his head and seemed to be remembereing a bad dream; then he drew a long breath in a regretful sigh. No dream about it. Old Jack was dead.

He got up, still not knowing where he was, and began to dress. Pete Jones came in with a cheery, "Hello, Red. I heard you gettin' up. How you feel?"

"Where's Hill? Whitey, too? Yes, and Sue?"

"Hill he has just got through tellin' a bunch of us that want him to take over the paper and run it to go to the devil. He says any more papers he got out in this town would be what he called an antee-*cli*-max, whatever that is. Anyhow, he says he allus avoids 'em."

"He drunk?"

"Not quite, yet."

"I like that feller. Too bad he ain't a cowpuncher." Red, from habit, up-tilted his boots, shook them. Bugs, even scorpions, had a way of crawling into boots. "Whitey?"

"Oh Dr. Rand's fixed the boy up, an' hired 'im. The Doc says he's tired of bein' a batch. Whitey can cook an' keep house for 'im."

Red found a new blue shirt. "This ain't mine."

"Yes 'tis. Your other un was rags.

Little Cohen of the Boston Store he give it to me when I went to buy one."

Red put on the shirt, buttoned it, drew on his boots, buckled on his guns. He drew a revolver, looked at it expertly. It was not loaded but had been cleaned. "Who done it, Pete? You?"

"You took a drink of whiskey an' went to sleep down at the print shop yesterday. So we brought you along up to my house here.

"An' you, bein' so pertickular about them guns, I—well—I sorta wiped 'em out. Seein' what good use you put 'em to, I didn't want 'em anyway spoiled."

"Thanks." Red methodically slipped bullets into the chambers. "If I said anything to hurt your feelin' when I was yellin' through that hole in the side of the print shop—I ain't sorry exactly, but I'll 'pologize."

Pete laughed; when the laugh stopped, he chuckled. "You didn't begin to say what all my wife said when she got hold of me! I reckon I didn't act very brave."

"Where's Sue an' them?" Red was looking about for his hat.

"Well, sir, Red, they're purty bad cut up. Old Jack dyin' thataway. And them damn fellers, when they busted into the Eldorado, they went upstairs and tore up and ruined, spiteful, everything they could find. Them girls ain't got a stitch except what they stand in."

"Where's my hat?"

"Hat?"

"Yeah, hat."

"I don't think we brung it along up."

"Gosh. I got to have a hat."

"We'll get one down at the Boston. You hungry?"

"Allus." Red sat down, rubbed his nose. "Pete, you know my Daisy horse?"

"Sure. Fine horse."

"I paid sixty dollars for that horse from a feller that liked me."

"I'll give you sixty an' throw in another un. Good one, too. That Daisy horse is sure worth it." Pete was trying to act as if he were making a bargain, not being generous.

"I got another un—pack horse—out at Hendersons. What you give me for that un? You can have him fetched in."

"Oh about twenty-ty-hm-five?"

"He ain't much good as a horse. But I'm figgerin' on needin' a little money. Jim Suack dead yet?"

"An' buried. So's Old Jack. They blowed a bugle over Jack's grave. It was solemn. An' I reckon the colonel's buried by now, too?"

"Who killed him?"

"'Pears like he stopped in at Toynton's ranch and tried to make Miz Toynton give 'im some money he knowed Bill had. Said he was goin' to Mexico. 'Pears like Old Mike Connor was just by happenchance loadin' his old buff'lo gun. 'Pears like Mike's eyes ain't what they ust to be so he poked the gun up clost so as to be sure not to miss!"

Red grunted, fingered the top button of his new shirt, loosened it. "What about the girl?"

"Toynton girl?"

"Um."

"That Army captain and Glaine and Curly, 'specially Curly, are sorta lookin' out after her. Her an' Curly made me promise I'd bring you over to the 'Change House soon as you woke up."

RED felt about his empty shirt pockets, then put out his hand. "Give me the makin's. I ain't goin'."

"You gota, Red."

Red rolled the cigarette, lighted it, drew hard. His lips moved in an abstract sort

of way, as if mumbling a sum in addition. "Sixty an' twenty-five, that's eighty-five, ain't it? Me an' Jack owe Sue anyhow twenty dollars we borrored. No, I ain't goin' to the 'Change House. I ain't goin' any place except outa town. Listen, you go bring me up a horse. My saddle and my rifle. I wish I had more money, but I ain't. I'll need maybe about fifteen dollars for myself. But you give that money you owe me for my horses you've bought to Zee Hill. Tell him to give Sue back her twenty then whack the rest of it 'mong them girls. I'm ridin' north. An' not sayin' good-bye to nobody."

Pete Jones jumped up and slapped him hard on the back. "Why, you damn fool, you ain't nothin' of the kind! I been savin' up to tell you! You got all kinds of money comin'! They was a thousand dollars reward, dead or alive, on that Harve! Glaine says you are shore goin' to get it. He himself seen you kill Harve. You goin' to ride off an' leave that?"

"Nope, I ain't. But I never had more'n fifty dollars at a time in my life without makin' a fool of myself. I'm gettin' too old to do things like that anymore. Now Hill can fix them girls out fine an' send 'em wherever they wanta go. I don't want no pile of money. All I want is just a job."

"I reckon you can purt-near have any job in Juilos County!"

"I don't want a job in Juilos County."

"The Toynton girl told Curly you are to be boss of the Toynton outfit."

"Pat Dugan can be. I won't. I wouldn't ride for anybody that didn't throw in and help folks like Hattie and Bud."

"Gosh, you sorta don't forgive people, do you?"

"I don't forget people like Bud and Hattie! What about Sam?"

"Ho, Sam? Yeah, too bad about Sam! They put 'im in a shed all by hisself last night. Maybe the soger just played like he was asleep to sorta entice Sam to sneak out. Anyhow, that soger was a mighty good shot by moonlight! And Ama—she's already got one ear of that Army captain's bent out of shape from listenin' to how she's been mistreated and abused all her life! Funny thing, though, Red. She says you are one of the sweetest boys she ever—"

"I know. She thinks I'm goin' to get a thousand dollars. Well you tell her I ain't. Half of that goes to Pat Dugan. Hill and the girls get the rest. I wouldn't feel good if I felt like I was gettin' *paid* for killin' them that killed Bud and Hattie.

"But they is one dollar that Ama can have if she wants. It's got heads on both sides. Be a nice little keepsake for her to have, an' what you call damned fittin', too."

THE END

The Cactus City Department

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

VOL. 19 NO. 61

CHEER FOR CHATOM

Dumbness No Drawback

EVER since Chump Chatom announced that he's going to run for Congressman at the next election, folks has been making talk against the idea. In fact, folks is amazed, pointing out that Chump is the town ne'er-do-well and has been a teetotal bust at doing even the simplest chores.

Well now, I don't see that that's any drawback to Chump's becoming a successful Congressman. You get to judge a man a good deal like you do a horse—by his blood lines, and you'll have to admit that Chump's blood lines carries all the qualifications of a good Congressman.

Take now, his grandfather, old Cheater Chatom. He set up the first store in Cactus County, years ago, and he was a genius at the business. He probably was the first man to discover that dried juniper berries looked exactly like dried peas. And it was Cheater who first figured out that sawdust soaked in molasses looked so much like coffee that nobody could tell the difference when he was weighing it out.

You got to admit that it takes a genius to do things like that, so clever that folks didn't know the difference, not for a long time anyways. In fact, it wasn't until Cheater died that Cactus County men found out what real tobacco tasted like. For years, Cheater hisself had been sacking the tobacco he sold—out in his own corral.

And as for Chump's old man, Chatter Chatom—say, he was the cleverest horse thief in the history of the county. Nobody could ever catch him red-handed; and whenever he was brought up in court on circumstantial evidence, he talked so fast and so convincing that he had everybody apologizing for being suspicious, even though they knew better. Yeah, Chatter was a champeen talker. When he died, they say he kept right on talking for a full hour after his heart stopped beating.

And you know for yourself that Chump has inherited those special qualities; he is as full of wind as a steer with its first bellyfull of spring grass.

So even if Chump ain't much good for anything else, you can't say that he won't make a good Congressman. After all, it takes very special talents to make a good Congressman, not brains or common sense.

DOCTOR INDIGNANT

Sawbones Gives The Lie To Malicious Gossip

WHEN Hal Dabson died the other day after a operation for appendicitis, folks right away started the gossip that Hal was the 18th straight victim of one of Doc Donnelly's operations.

As soon as Doc heard that, he sure got wrathy, saying that Hal didn't die of the operation atall. Doc had all the cutting done, and had got Hal sewed up a full fifteen minutes before he died. Besides, Doc argues, Hal was only the 17th, not the 18th.

And furthermore, it wasn't appendicitis anyways. Doc says he couldn't even find an appendix in Hal.

So let's hear no more of this malicious gossip about Doc. Hell, he don't make any more mistakes than the rest of us. The only difference is that he can't correct his.

SOCIETY DEPT.

Widow Don't Play Favorites

FOR most citizens this was kind of a dull week socially, on account of there wasn't no outstanding and remarkable weddings or funerals. However, the Widow Wilson had a very busy time keeping caught up with her social obligations.

Wednesday morning, for instance, she had to go out and cut some cactus blossoms to put on the grave of her third husband. Then she had to rush home and get ready for the party she was giving in honor of the anniversary of her fifth marriage.

And Thursday was just as bad. The Widow was hard put to celebrate the death of her first husband, the birthday of husband Number Four, and the anniversary of her marriage with Number Two. And besides those celebrations, she found time to throw a shindig that evening to announce her betrothal to Number Six.

Well, you got to hand it to the Widow for being plumb democratic and impartial. Any gent who marries her in the future can be sure he'll get a square deal.

WAR POSTPONED

THE feud up in Florido Valley was due to get started up again this last week, but it had to be postponed. The Northsiders was all ready, but the Southsiders hadn't got all their beef drove back on the summer range.

However, the Northsiders are over helping their enemies with the drive, so I guess the chore will be finished in a couple days, and the feudists can get to their fighting.

THE CACTUS CITY DEPARTMENT

TECHNICAL ALIBI

Judge Saves The Family Honor

WHEN Sonora Sol was being tried for murder the other day, it looked pretty bad for him. The evidence showed, clear and certain, that Sol had blasted a gent full of .45 slugs, so there was nothing the jury could do but vote to hang him. Howsoever, Judge Joker Jameson happens to be the brother-in-law of Sonora, and Joker didn't like atall the idea of hanging one of his own family. So he stalls off the verdict until he can do some sharp thinking and have a inspiration. Then he takes a hand and asks the widow of the murdered man a few technical questions.

Wasn't it true, he asked, that the deceased was subject to taking cold easy? And wasn't it true that the deceased didn't die until twenty-four hours after he'd been shot? To which the widow answered a "yes."

"Well then," pointed out the Judge, much relieved, "this ain't a case of murder atall. It wasn't bullets that killed the deceased; it was pneumonia. If the deceased had only plugged up the holes in his body, he wouldn't a' had a draft blowing through him, an' he wouldn't a' caught pneumonia an' died. Therefore it's as plain as a bump on a bull's nose that it's the deceased's own dang fault he died. The case against Sonora Sol is hereby dismissed."

(I guess when a man is on trial for his life, the next best thing to being innocent is being a brother-in-law of the Judge.)

SMART TALKER

Pot-gut Gould Gets Told

IT LOOKED for a minute like somebody had finally hung a good joke on Cross-cut Kane, of the Gem Barber Shop and Baths, the other day. It was big, fat Pot-gut Gould who came waddling into the Barber Shop and asked Cross-cut could he come out to Pot-gut's place and do a little job that afternoon.

"Yeah, I can get out there," says Cross-cut. "But, hell, if you want a shave, why don't you wait a minute. There's only two ahead of yuh."

"Oh, I don't want yuh to shave *me*," replied Pot-gut. "Yuh see, I aim to butcher a hog this afternoon, but I ain't much of a hand at it. So I figured that if you come out and gave that hog carcass a once-over-lightly, why it'd be butchered pretty neat."

Of course, that got a big laugh all around, but danged if Cross-cut didn't find a answer right quick, saying, "Well, Pot-gut, I ain't ever shaved a real hog before. However, I been shaving you right along, so I guess I can do all right."

(Which just goes to show you that Cross-cut's tongue is a dang site sharper than his razor.)

SWEDE SAVED

OLE LARSON, the milk cow raiser, had a narrow escape from death the other day. Ole was putting a cement floor in his milk house, and he stood too long in the same place. With the result that the cement set and Ole was left stranded there on the floor unable to budge.

Of course, he hollered for his wife, but neither one of them Swedes could figure out anything to do about it, and it looked like Ole would have to stay there until he was starved to death. Pretty quick, though, a neighbor come along and Ole begged him to figure out some way to save his life.

Well, it took the neighbor maybe half or maybe quarter of a second to figure this out, but he didn't free Ole right away. Instead he set around for several hours, pretending to be thinking, then he exclaimed that he had a inspiration. Taking out his knife, he cut the laces of Ole's shoes, and told the Swede to step out of them.

Well, that is the nice thing about being a Swede. You don't have to have brains—only a neighbor.

NO EMBARRASSMENT

Hotel Guests Made To Feel At Home

YOU sure got to hand it to Pop McCoy for making things as easy as possible for guests at his Metropole Hotel. Pop's latest improvement is to do away with the register, in which everybody was supposed to sign his name.

This ain't so much for the benefit of them who can't write, but to save embarrassment for them who can't even make an "X."

OVERESTIMATION

Runty Gets Too Proud Too Quick

CONCEIT is a very dangerous thing, and conceit is what gave Runty Runyon a busted skull. After being away on a roundup for a couple of weeks, Runty returned home the other day to find his house cluttered up with all the neighbor womenfolks who was very excited. On inquiring what was the idea, Runty was told that just a couple hours previous he had become a father. Well, of course, Runty was very proud to have a baby in the family and right off he asked to see it.

"It?" titters one of the ladies. "Why Runty, there wasn't just one! Take a look in the spare bedroom there and you'll see."

Even prouder than ever at this news, Runty wheels around and opens the door to the spare bedroom. And that is when he got the worst shock of his life, for the room is plumb filled with babies, probably an even dozen head. Just one look at that baby remuda, and Runty is so amazed at his own ability that he faints dead away, hitting his head on the floor and breaking his skull.

However, it turned out that only two of those babies was Runty's; the rest belonged to the neighbor women, and if Runty hadn't been so conceited, he would have figured this out and not busted his skull.

KILLER'S LITTLE MISTAKE

By
RAY NAFZIGER

The Kid suddenly remembered he had to kill a man

The Kid's guns came high in price—but the Kid never failed to get his man!

THE "FORTY-ONE" KID was playing stud when Attorney Glade Gleeman entered Jim Creswell's saloon. Jim Creswell shoved out the bottle of quality whiskey the long-faced lawyer always drank and poured one for himself. While they drank, they stood talking, looking at the Kid who played poker as he lived, as cold and calm as a stone statue given life.

"As much heart in him as a rattlesnake," Gleeman observed as the Kid raked in a pile of chips.

"Not much warmth to him," admitted Jim Creswell, who was moving heavy jaws on a cud of tobacco. The saloonman was as close to being

a friend of the Forty-one Kid's as anyone ever got. The slim, boyish, tawny-eyed gun-ace who used Creswell's saloon as a hangout had known Creswell for a long time and he trusted the fat saloonkeeper—as much as he ever trusted anyone.

"I've heard," went on Gleeman who was lawyer for most of the big cattle outfits in the county, "that the Kid isn't above using that forty-one pistol of his—for a price."

Creswell looked around him, saw no one was within earshot. "Yeah," he said. "He's been knowed to. Five hundred is what he gets. If yuh want to arrange anything like that, mebby-so it would be better to deal with him through me. The Kid don't like lawyers; says they're polecats."

"Does, does he?" said Gleeman, a little uneasily. The lawyer knew all the crooked paths of the courts and how to bribe juries and even judges. But this job he had in mind was outside the law. Cautiously he spilled it to Creswell.

The big Hat-rack outfit, owned by the Best brothers, Clay and Jube, wanted a small neighboring rancher put out of the road. Dick Hallam was the rancher's name, a young fellow, who had title to some springs and a big creek adjoining the Hat-rack range. His water not only controlled valuable range, but Hallam had been planning also to dam his creek and irrigate a few hundred acres of land for feed. Clay and Jube Best hated to see a young neighbor get so prosperous with something that they could use themselves. Hence the simple solution; have Hallam killed.

Luckily for the Bests, they operated in a county in New Mexico where such affairs could be handled with little trouble. A man with a smart lawyer like Glade Gleeman could hide behind an adobe wall, potshoot a neighbor, and go free on a plea of self-defense.

Neither Clay nor Jube Best, however, cared to be mixed directly in the killing, Glade confided to Creswell. They could have hired one of their cowboys to do the job, but the cowboy might talk later or do a little blackmailing. It was known that the Forty-one Kid never talked later—or at any other time. He was a professional killer who, when his job was done, proceeded to forget it.

Killing Dick Hallam would be a simple affair for the Kid, Gleeman explained. On Wednesday afternoon, Hallam would be branding cattle at Bullet Springs. The Kid could sneak up and quietly remove Dick Hallam from the land of the living. Clay and Jube Best would be near the Springs watching. They would find Hallam's body, testify that he had been killed from ambush by a Mexican.

"You see," explained Gleeman, "Hallam built a smoke under a Mex horsethief a week ago, and it'll be accepted that the feller come back and laid for him. The Bests kept on the best of terms with Hallam; no one knows they want Hallam's land and they won't be suspected. If there should be any suspicion of the Kid, their word would clear him. But everyone knows the Kid carries a forty-one pistol. It would look better if Hallam wasn't ended with a forty-one."

"He won't be," said Creswell. "Don't worry. The Kid looks like a boy, but he wasn't born yesterday or even last week. He always carries a forty-one; swears he wouldn't carry anything else. But he never shot nobody with it yet. Except in cases like now if he was to git into a battle in this saloon, say in a argyment with yuh, Glade, an' salivate yuh. Then that forty-one is what he'd use."

The long-faced lawyer shivered. "Don't worry about that," he said hastily. "There'll be no arguments between the Kid and me. I'd sooner argue with a grizzly. Sure you remember the time and place: Bullet

Springs, Wednesday, along about three in the afternoon. But five hundred for the job is pretty high for an easy little affair like this."

"Not too high for havin' it done right," said Creswell. "When the Kid pulls a killin', it's a bang-up job. No strings left danglin'. Nossir, there ain't a weakness nor a soft spot in that boy. Unless mebbyso he's a leetle soft when it comes to women. Specially blondes."

"Won't be no women, blonde or otherwise, in this case," said Glade. "Hallam's a widower; got no woman around his camp except an old Mexican cook. And five hundred is the least he would take?"

"I'll call him an' you kin argy with him about it," Creswell offered. "Mebbe a slick tongue like you, Glade, could talk the Kid into scalin' 'er down, but as I said he ain't fond o' lawyers. Says they're all pole—"

"No, let it go," hurriedly put in the lawyer. "Five hundred is satisfactory. Entirely satisfactory."

"In advance, it is," remarked Creswell, spitting across the bar to a perfect bull's eye on a spittoon in the center of the floor.

Glade Gleeman drew out a long thin wallet and when no one in the saloon was looking their way, he slipped a roll of bills into Creswell's pudgy hand. With a final look at the thin impassive face of the Kid, the lawyer shivered a little again, and left the saloon.

Not until the end of the poker game, for the Forty-one Kid disliked to be disturbed in the middle of a card session, did Creswell call him over to tell him about the new job. The Kid's hand, small, almost feminine, stuffed the roll of bills casually into a vest pocket. The Kid, under the big, heavy, black sombrero he always wore, looked smaller than he really was; his sharp-featured face, lit up with eyes that were tawny like a cat's, looked pinched, a little hungry.

"This Dick Hallam, from what I've hear'n, is a scrapper," Creswell warned him. "He used to be a deputy sheriff down at Whitney which is a plumb rough-tough neighborhood. Carries a big Bisley that bores a tunnel through a feller's middle big enough to drive a steer through. Better not give him a chance at a shot, like yuh allus do."

The Kid didn't even bother to comment on that. He was the Forty-one Kid, and when he went out to kill someone, he didn't ask questions about the pistol prowess of the party he was to end. He always gave his victim a chance for one shot; he would make no exception of Dick Hallam. However good Hallam might be, the Forty-one Kid was confident he was better.

"Something else I don't like about this," said Creswell. "The Bests want to see this killin'; they're goin' to be layin' out, near the Springs. Chancet they might double-cross yuh an' kill yuh."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders. He preferred to have no witnesses to his little affairs, even when they were his employers. But the Bests, lacking the guts to end Hallam themselves, were the kind that would enjoy seeing a man ended by their hired gunman. The Kid knew their sort. They hadn't enough nerve to try to double-cross him . . .

TUESDAY afternoon he gave it out that he was riding to see a rancher friend south of town, a direction opposite from his ultimate destination, Bullet Springs. Reaching the ranch where people would provide him with an alibi for the time he spent riding to Bullet Springs and back, he left his gray horse, and forking a rangy bay, struck out at dark for the Hat-rack range. He would cover the distance that night; return the next under cover of darkness.

The bay took up a fast trot and kept

it hour after hour. The Kid half-standing in the stirrups to absorb the jolting, whistled softly as he rode. With that five hundred dollars he would try bucking faro, maybe run it up to a couple of thousand if he was lucky.

Killing for money was a dirty way to make a living, but the Kid didn't see it that way. Killing and being killed, to him, were as much a part of life as gambling, eating, sleeping. He had cut his teeth on a forty-five barrel. Six men of his immediate family had been killed in a range feud before he was twelve. At that age he had graduated into a full-fledged gun warrior. After the rest of the men of his family, as well as all the men of the other faction, had been wiped out, it had been natural for him to keep on killing.

Those years of deadly bushwhack fighting during his boyhood had warped the Kid's mind to believe that there was nothing dishonorable in killing for pay—nor from ambush. Some believed in shooting their troubles out in the open; the Kid had been raised to fight it out from cover, although never yet had he failed to give the other man a chance for one shot at him. Not much chance, it was true, since the Kid usually appeared with all the surprise of a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

He knew the Hat-rack and the Bullet country from having once ridden round-up in it, before Dick Hallam had come to the country. Hallam he had never seen; the Best brothers he knew by sight.

Near daybreak finding himself a thick brush clump, he fed his horse the grain he had brought, staked him out and slept away the morning. At noon he saddled again and headed leisurely for Bullet Springs, keeping always to the thick timber. Descending into a canyon, the Kid fell into one of his rare lapses from the caution he used on these expeditions. Ordinarily he would have dropped into the canyon only after carefully surveying it. Perhaps he was trusting too much to his instinct to warn him of danger, and if so his instinct did not fail him, for it was nothing dangerous that he ran into, merely two youngsters playing along a tiny stream. The Kid didn't know it, but the rivulet was a branch of the big creek that Dick Hallam planned to dam, forming a reservoir to irrigate his land.

The older could not have been over eight, the younger four or five. They were both in overalls and at first the Forty-one Kid thought they were boys cursed with a proud mother who refused to cut the long yellow curls that fell to their small shoulders. But they were girls, he decided a moment later, a pair of lively youngsters, chuckling, shouting gleefully, as they tried to dam with mud and stones and sticks the little stream.

Near them in the trees were two tents; he judged this was the camp of some trapper or prospector. At any rate there were no adults in sight, and the children having already caught sight of the Kid, it would do no good to duck back into the brush. He rode toward them, heading for the nearest trees, and deciding to be more careful thereafter.

The old saying that children, dogs and cats can read human nature more surely than grown-up people went wrong here. For at sight of the Forty-one Kid, the two golden-haired little girls should have stopped their play and fled shrieking to the shelter of the tents. Instead they greeted the rider with a shy but friendly interest.

In fact, they seemed extremely glad to see him. They had been looking for someone to move rocks to their dam. As the younger artlessly pointed out these small boulders with a tiny finger, the Kid grinned. Already these two young ladies had learned that curls and good looks brought

with them the privilege of asking favors from older people.

Amiably the Kid dismounted to move the rocks, and then volunteered to help with the dam itself, lifting stones into place, plastering mud, wading in water and getting his feet soaked.

"What's your idea of hobbling this here stream, anyway?" he asked as the acquaintance progressed.

"We're going to have a reserwer an' ir'gate land just like papa," said the older.

"Yeth; ir-gateth juth like papa," lisped the younger.

"Going to be a mighty tough job—damming up this big creek," the Kid warned them after a grave inspection of the tiny stream.

"'Tain't a creek; it's a river," said the other, and the Kid apologized and went to drag more rocks. The Forty-one Kid's boyhood days had been too filled with fighting for such idle pursuits as damming up streams. At the age of ten he had spent long days perched in the observation post of a tall pine, scanning the country about for sign of his family's enemies.

The minutes passed, a half hour, an hour. The stream broke down their first dam, and the Kid assisted valiantly by the yellow-heads, plastered mud, and wielded a broken spade to scoop out earth. He was as pleased as the two youngsters with the size of the lake which the new dam formed.

It was the Forty-one Kid's suggestion to dig a canal from the dam, with which they could ir'gate a little flat area below. When during their work the Kid expressed surprise that they were left alone, they told him they were really not alone; Juana was asleep in one of the tents. Juana, he guessed was their Mexican nurse and was taking her afternoon siesta. She would be waking soon, and the Kid squinted upward at the sun.

It was only then that the Forty-one Kid, spattered with mud, his boots water-soaked, recalled he had come to this country on an errand. For a moment he had a hard time recalling just what errand. Oh, yes, to kill a man at Bullet Springs.

REGRETFULLY he told his fellow engineers that he would have to leave and was flattered when both of them begged him almost tearfully to stay. As far as he was concerned he would have liked to stay until dark, but he had been paid to do a job, and he didn't go back on his promises.

Climbing on his horse, he waved his hand at his two friends and rode into the timber. Half an hour later, he was high up on the ridge above Bullet Springs. The shadows were already stretching out long from the peaks when he halted on a bench, thickly wooded with cedar and piñon.

From between his saddle blankets he drew out a pair of soles which he fastened over those of his small boots. Then leaving his horse tied, he descended the ridge, stepping hard, leaving the footprints of a large, heavy-set man behind him. He was the feline animal now, advancing on his prey, every sense alert. From below drifted up the faint scent of smoke from the fire Dick Hallam was using to heat his branding irons.

On a little point of rock, the Kid halted finally and bellying to the earth like a cougar, peered out cautiously. Below was a makeshift pole corral, and one man working a bunch of cattle. Hallam must be poor not to be able to hire at least one Mexican to help him.

After locating Hallam, the Kid searched the slope for the two Bests, Clay and Jube, who would be watching to see their neighbor ended. He found them finally. They were lying to the side and below him, behind a huge boulder, looking intently at the corral through a screen of grass.

A queer pair, thought the Kid, to pay for a job they could easily have done themselves. But some men were squeamish when it came to killing. Nothing squeamish about the Kid, He got down to business. The range was a little long for a pistol, but not in his hand.

The forty-one gun he carried he left in his holster, but tilting back his heavy black sombrero, his right hand took from where it rested on his thick hair, a light weight, stubby-barreled forty-four, wrapped in a silk neckerchief. People guessed that he carried a second iron on his person, but no one, not even Jim Creswell, knew where.

The trick was original with him although he had heard a story that Billy the Kid, apparently unarmed, had once carried a little sixshooter in his sombrero and had set an Albuquerque saloon in an uproar by a sleight of hand trick of producing it, firing, and hiding it under his hat. A bouncer had been driven crazy, in fact, by his failure to find the gun on Billy's person.

Carefully the Kid tilted the barrel down, drew back the hammer gently and sighted the man below him, not intending to shoot just then, but trying out his instrument, as a musician does a little preliminary fingering before starting to play. Hallam was finishing a calf. Releasing the animal, he stood up and taking off his smudged sombrero, wiped away sweat with a blue neckerchief. His hair was a curly tangle, the color of gold.

THE KID stiffened a little, and eased the hammer of the gun down. He took another long look at the man below and then shifted his position until he could look down on Clay and Jube Best. The two were getting a little impatient he saw, probably wondering why their hired gunman didn't show up and do the job for which they had paid him.

The Kid's tawny eyes narrowed. Again he brought up the gun. He was plain cold killer now, no more emotion in him than in the boulder behind which the two Best brothers were hidden. Moving out until the two brothers could by turning their heads easily see him, he thumbed back the hammer of the pistol. This time the barrel was pointed not toward Dick Hallam, but at the right foot of Clay Best.

His finger tightened on the trigger, and the explosion broke the stillness with all the force of a cannon. Fragments of heel flew from the right boot of Clay Best and a startled yelp came from both brothers. The Kid shot again, deliberately firing above their heads, the lead slug sending fragments of rock over the two.

The Bests saw the Kid then, and galvanized into wild action, snatching their holstered guns to fire at him. They hurried their shots too much, as the Kid had figured; neither bullet came within ten feet. They had had the chance he always gave his victims; the Kid shot rapidly then. Clay Best he drilled through the forehead, a very neat shot considering the range.

The second brother, Jube, in a panic, flung himself toward the side of the big boulder, hoping to get to cover, but the Kid's shot caught him before he could make it, a bullet through the thigh that halted the man, made him fall against the boulder. As Jube fell the Kid sent in a finishing shot, and Best collapsed, sliding down the boulder, clutching his sixshooter desperately as if it were a rope that would keep him from slipping into the abyss of Death. The man's fingers released the gun finally, and he slid down the surface of the rock until his body lay crumpled, draped over a small boulder, legs hanging grotesquely over a stubby leafless bush as if hung there to dry.

Jube Best and Clay Best were both

dead, the Forty-one Kid knew. He did not look down again at the man who had been branding cattle in the corral. In time Dick Hallam would come up and find the bodies of his two neighbors.

The Kid slithered swiftly back, without disturbing so much as a pebble or moving a branch of a bush to indicate his passing. Then erect again, walking heavily on the big soles attached to his boots, he returned to his horse. There he took off the soles, hid them, wrapped his short-barreled sixshooter in the neckerchief and replaced it under his sombrero. It would not be long until dusk and he had a long ride before him. The mud gotten from helping the two little yellow curly-heads build their dam had dried, and the Kid, smiling a little, brushed it off . . .

IT WAS two nights later in Jim Creswell's saloon, with more than the ordinary early evening crowd gathered to exchange theories about the strange killing of Clay and Jube Best at Bullet Springs. Dick Hallam had found the bodies, had notified the officials. The sheriff had tracked the killer, a big man evidently, to his horse, and had tracked the horse to a stretch of badlands where the killer, like many other outlaws, had succeeded in covering his trail.

No way of figuring out those killings; it was undoubtedly destined to be an unsolved mystery.

The Forty-one Kid was sitting in on a poker game, playing a stingy game, as if his funds were down pretty low. It was his policy never to show much money immediately after one of his jobs.

The lawyer, Glade Gleeman, came in and Jim Creswell shoved out the bottle of whiskey he kept for customers who were able to pay for the best. Glade was not particularly annoyed over the mix-up that had resulted in the death of his clients instead of Dick Hallam. The lawyer would be administrator of the estate, and in settling up the Best ranch, money could cling to his fingers.

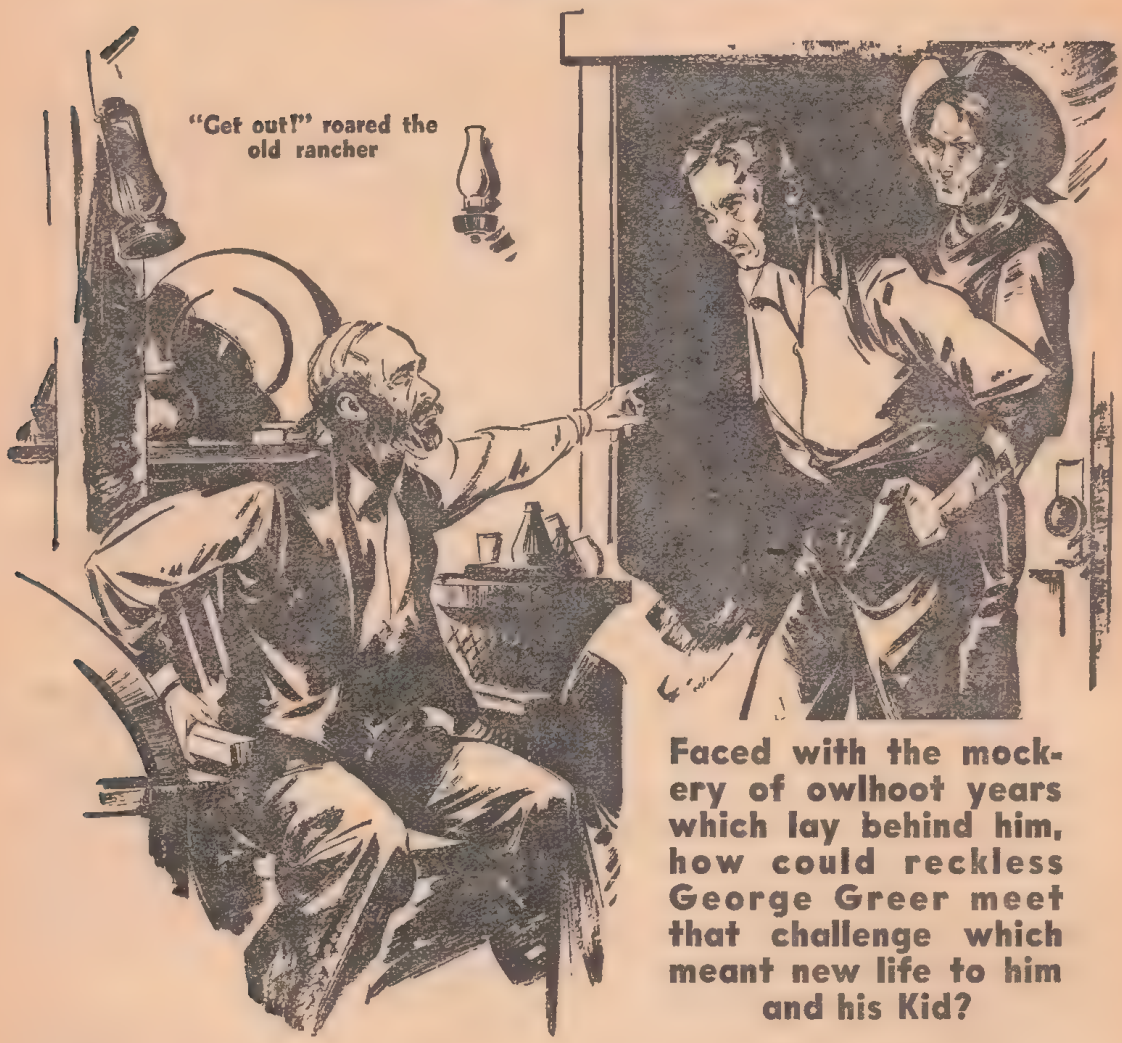
"I can't figure it out," he said to Creswell. "How could a sharp customer like the Kid make such a terrible mistake? Of course, I wouldn't want it repeated to him that I'm making any complaint. But how come the Kid to ever shoot the fellows that hired him instead of the hombre they hired him to shoot? Is he short-sighted or what?"

"It's got me puzzled," admitted Creswell. "The Kid didn't explain nothin' to me; said careless-like he guessed he'd just made a little mistake. O' course, I didn't say nothin' to him about it, but I kinda figger he must be gettin' a bit absent-minded. Like I tol' yuh, Glade, the Kid ain't got a soft spot nor weakness about him—well, 'cep'n one—women—specially blondes."

"Wasn't no women in this case," said Glade positively. "Can't lay it to that. Hallam was a widower. No women around 'cept a fat old Mex *señora* at his camp, takin' care of Hallam's two little yellow-haired girls."

WILDCAT STUFF

By HAPSBURG LIEBE



Faced with the mockery of owlhoot years which lay behind him, how could reckless George Greer meet that challenge which meant new life to him and his Kid?

IT HAD been almost insufferably hot that day, and Rame Larimore's horse was very sorely in need of water, feed, a rubdown. Nevertheless, Larimore dismounted and dropped rein before the twilight-dim old saddle shed, then walked off without a backward glance.

"I sure hate to tell Joab Evart," he muttered under his breath.

For an hour the tall blond cowboy had been saying that, over and over, to himself. It was best for Evart to know in advance. Perhaps he would soften a little. Suddenly a harsh voice cut into Rame's worrying.

"You, Larimore; come here!"

Two of the JE crew had finished supper before the others, and now sat on a bench against the bunkhouse wall, smoking. One of the pair was the range boss, Kip Farber, high-handed and sour. Beside him sat Sneak Truby, a rat-faced little rider who stuck to him like a sun-shadow. Few outfits would have given Truby a job. It was said that he did Farber's dirty work for him.

"Leavin' your nag for somebody else to look after, Larimore?" growled the range boss. "Well, it's all right—this time. JE wants to see you. Pronto!"

Larimore had drawn up within half a rod of the two. In the dusk he saw Truby wink knowingly at Farber, and in spite of himself Rame flared, "If you wasn't so damn' little, you rat, I'd beat you up. You figure that JE is goin' to fire me, don't you?"

Sneak's right hand eased toward the Colt on his hip but Larimore ignored the movement. Kip Farber spoke with much heat. "Try beatin' Sneak up sometime when you feel lucky, cowboy. You feel lucky now, maybe?" he asked insolently.

"I sure do," retorted the tall rider. "Get on your feet, range boss. I've held in as long as I—"

"Cut that out!" This was another voice, one that creaked, but suggested authority. Wizened and scraggly-bearded old Buckskin Orr, the Evart cook for twenty years, appeared in the nearby bunkhouse doorway. "Joab wants you right now, Rame!"

Reluctantly Larimore went toward the ranch house, feeling Farber's malignant gaze boring into his back. Perhaps JE would fire him. One never could tell what that stern old cattleman would do next. But a job was not as important to Rame Larimore as the news he carried.

Dal Evart, Joab's daughter, sat in a gallery rocker when he walked up the steps with spurs jingling. She was dark like her father, but utterly feminine and appealing. Rame could see that she was smiling faintly in the semi-darkness.

"Had another run-in with Kip, didn't you," she began, low-voiced. "I overheard a little of it from here. You tell JE about that, Rame—yes, I know. You're not any blabmouth. Just the same, you tell JE."

Larimore, hat in hand, drew up beside her chair.

"Battery B Greer and the kid were in town," he whispered. "A Bar A cowpoke said they was headed for here. It's easy to guess why."

This "Battery B" was a sort of nickname. George Greer had ridden for years with a Wild West show as its fastest and finest shot. He had been dashing and handsome then. He was anything but dashing and handsome now.

Dal Evart ceased to smile. Larimore turned away silently.

Joab Evart, tall and gaunt and bearded, sat at his desk in a corner of the lighted living room. There was old, old grief in his eyes. He swung around in his chair as the cowboy halted two paces away. JE never wasted words.

"Rame," he said, "I told you twenty months ago that if you'd stop the wildcat stuff and ride range for me I'd make it worth your while. Today you're the best cowhand I ever had. I'm lettin' Farber go and offerin' you the foreman job. Want the place?"

"I'd be loco if I didn't, JE," Larimore answered promptly, "and I could talk all night and then not even half tell you how much I thank you. You and Miss Dal believed in me when nobody else did. I'd have been hung by this time, if I'd kept on with what you call the wildcat stuff. Well—say, JE, there's somethin' I've got to tell you—"

SOMEHOW he couldn't get any farther with it. Before the now curious old ranchman could speak, there came the sounds of hoofs close by. Then Dal walked into the living room with a big man and a slim boy of fourteen on her heels. The man was in rags, unwashed, unshaven. Larimore noted that he had a six-gun on either hip.

The boy wore very cheap new clothing; his boots had red tops and squeaked. Neither George Greer nor his little son removed his hat. They

halted before Joab Evart, who had snapped to his feet and stood like an oak tree, as strong and as motionless. He was ashen-white under his full beard. Greer spoke in a heavy, shaken voice.

"For years I've wanted to tell you, Joab, that when I persuaded your girl Myra to run off and marry me I meant well by her, and I was always good to her. But it wasn't the life for a woman like her.

"She always hoped you'd forgive her. But you wouldn't answer her letters, you was so bitter. Another thing I want to tell you, Joab. When she died, we was in K. C., and I used all the money I had, and sold my hawss and saddle and guns, to put her away —nice—"

The heavy voice broke. Evart, man of rock and iron, said nothing. Battery B Greer stiffened and pursued:

"I never was worth a nickel after that. Back in this state again, I'd leave Rabbit with people here and there, and ride the owlhoot. They caught me, and sent me up for eight years. I reckon you know about that. And when I got out, I hit the owlhoot trail again. I'm gone, Joab. Clean gone. No hope for me. But there's this button here—I mean, if you'll take him and raise him, I'll never bother you any."

That was all. George Greer turned, was gone in the night. Dal Evart and Larimore waited for old JE to speak. But it was Rabbit who broke the tragic silence.

"So you're my grampaw. I didn't know you weared a beard like thataway. My daddy said you was a fine feller. He's a fine feller too, my daddy is."

Only Evart's lips moved. "Get out!" he said *"Get out!"*

There was sudden defiance in the lad's clear gray eyes, the eyes of the once dashing George Greer. Dal Evart tried to speak, and choked on the words.

"Wait, boss," Rame Larimore entreated, "you cain't do this. He's your own flesh and blood, and you can make somethin' out of him. You—"

"And you get out with him!" thundered the angry old cattleman.

Rame felt a hand slipping into his, and heard a small, stout voice. "Le's go, cowboy. We'll show him we don't give a damn. You got a gun for me, ain't you? Because I can shoot. We'll ketch up with my daddy and all be owlhooters, won't we?"

Fired off the big JE spread, it seemed to Larimore—who had less than two years between him and his career of buckwild daredeviltry—that there wasn't much else left for him. Evart's unfairness rankled in him like poison. He walked out of the room without a word.

Rabbit Greer had come in a patchwork saddle on an old blind paint pony. He picked up the rein and followed Larimore toward the bunkhouse, his new boots squeaking. Larimore said, "I don't want to hear you cuss any more, button."

"Bueno," the kid said. "I won't."

"Don't forget it. Now listen, Rabbit. You don't need any gun, and we're not goin' to ride any owlhoot." He had begun to see matters in a saner light.

They were within a few rods of the bunkhouse when Dal Evart overtook them. She gripped the boy's arm. "I'm sorry, Rabbit. I'm afraid he never will break, but I'll do my best. Rame, I'm sorry about you, too. You won't go back—I'm sure of that. JE thinks a lot of you whether he admits it or not. If you'd get a range job around here, I could let you know if he wants you again. Try, won't you?"

JE was a power in his county. When he discharged a man, other outfits didn't take that man on for fear of displeasing Joab Evart. Dal hadn't thought of that.

"I'll try, ma'am," Larimore promised.

She bade them goodbye, kissed her small nephew, who rubbed his mouth furiously, and ran through the darkness toward the ranch house.

RABBIT GREER left his old blind pony ground-anchored near the bunkhouse doorway, and walked squeakingly in with Larimore. The place was lighted by two oil lamps hung from the ridge-pole. Strung out between the tiers of bunks were four small homemade tables, and at each sat four range riders playing poker for matches, whiling the evening away. Kip Farber was at a makeshift desk in the rear, laboriously working up a payroll sheet. Beside the desk sat Sneak Truby.

The two newcomers drew up at the rear doorway, which opened into a wide leanto that served as dining room and kitchen. In there Buckskin Orr stood watching a Mexican *muchacho* wash dishes.

"Wish you'd feed this kid, Buckskin," said Larimore. "Me, I'm not hungry. Go on, son. I'll be fixin' up my warbag."

"Warbag—?" old Orr jerked his wizened face around. "Sure, I'll feed the younker, but where you goin', Rame?"

"I'm fired, old-timer," Larimore said and turned toward his bunk. Kip Farber winked at his shadow, got to his feet.

"Fired, eh?" Kip's voice held a note of triumph. "Shows that no ord'nary run-o'-the-range cowpoke can have everything his own way all the time, anyhow. I knowed it was comin'. Who's the button there?"

"None o' your business who the button is. Take my advice and forget about him, or you might be gosh-awful sorry," Larimore retorted.

They stood glaring. The sixteen cowboys who had been playing cards scented a fight, as cowboys will, rose and soon were crowding around.

"I reckon JE hauled you over the coals right, didn't he?" Kip taunted. "What did you tell him about me?"

There was a sudden icy twinkle in the tall cowboy's eyes. Quietly he said, "Well, I didn't tell him about seein' you sell a fat whiteface to a Border Mex for beef. It'd 'a' seemed too much like blabmouthin'—spite-work, you know. I found out afterwards that you'd sold that same Mex beef steers before and pocketed the money." He paused. "Feel like callin' me a liar, Kip?"

To Farber this was, in effect, a bombshell exploding in his face. He went pale, then turned beet-red. His lips worked, but no words came. Those of the crew who sided with him began to gravitate over to the clear space at his right, and leading these was a sloe-eyed and usually silent rider who wore a Mexican sombrero and called himself Duncan Clore.

Larimore's sympathizers stood where they were. Half the cowboys, perhaps, had not taken off their gun-belts. Farber's Colt lay on his desk, as convenient as though it were in his holster. Truby's gun was on his hip, and nobody noticed, apparently, that he was easing a hand toward the weapon. The situation was taut, and heavy with danger. Silence made it the more tense.

And then the shrill cry of the fourteen-year boy broke the silence.

"You there," Rabbit Greer aimed his words at Sneak Truby. The kid held in both hands, cocked and leveled, a six-gun that he had found on a nearby bunk. "Don't you pull no hardware on Rame—"

Br-a-a-ang! The kid's trigger finger had tightened involuntarily, and the result was bedlam. Truby went through the nearest window so fast it almost seemed that the bullet had driven him, when, in point of fact, he hadn't been touched. Larimore sprang through the fogging powder smoke to disarm the boy.

Instantly another weapon roared, this one from the hip of a Farber underling—Truby's gun bellowed from a window—other guns blazed, among them Rame Larimore's and the ranch foreman's—it was like a contagion, and squarely into the middle of the uproar sprang old Buckskin Orr.

"Stop it, you fools!" he shouted. "Don't none o' you know what the hell you're doin', or why—dod-dang you, stop it!"

Sobered, they obeyed. Orr peered through the now thick, swirling smoke, trying to locate Rame Larimore and the button. He saw a cowboy with a bleeding hand, and another whose shirt was turning red from the gash of a bullet across his shoulder. And then he saw that a man lay supine and still on the floor with a gaping bullet-hole between his eyes.

IT WAS the Farber underling, Duncan Clore.

"Who done that?" growled Buckskin.

No one spoke for a minute. Then Kip Farber drawled:

"Well, who do you think done it? I want to call your attention to this, Buckskin: Dunc's gun is still in the holster. See it there, don't you?"

"Rame Larimore done this, Buckskin," said one of Farber's satellites. "I seen him, and it was delib'rate. He hated Dunc as much as he hated Kip; it was a chance to git rid o' Dunc, and he took it."

"And I saw him," Farber told Orr.

Truby crawled swiftly back through the window. "Yeah," whined the rat-faced rider, "and I saw him, too. Wonder where Larimore is?"

He knew very well. He'd watched Rame carry Rabbit Greer out of the bunkhouse and throw him onto his saddled pony. Larimore had overheard enough of the bunkhouse conversation to be aware of the fact that he stood accused of killing Dunc Clore. It put him into a deep hole.

His friends in the crew could hardly take oath to the effect that he had not shot Dunc; his enemies most certainly would swear that he had. Nobody had forgotten the wild career he had pursued before he came to work at the JE.

"Rabbit," he muttered, "you didn't happen to notice who it was plugged the hombre in the Mexican sombrero, did you?"

The boy shook his head. Then old Buckskin Orr came out, saw the dim outlines of man, boy, and pony in the darkness, and hurried to them.

"JE and Miss Dal heared the shootin', and they've jest come in the back way, Rame," said Orr, speaking fast. "Kip and them is tryin' to frame you—that is, if you didn't sure-enough git Dunc. Did you, cowboy?"

"No," quickly. "I winged me a man, but it wasn't Dunc. This Clore, he was a fast jigger with iron, and I was tryin' to watch him. When he went down he was ready to shoot. His gun was in a swivel holster, with the barrel stuck through, and he didn't need to draw. Whoever got him saved me the trouble but I only meant to shoot and break Dunc's gun arm. Don't believe it was any o' the boys standin' close to me, or I'd 'a' noticed. You got any ideas about it, old-timer?"

"You bet I have," old Buckskin said, with a glance toward the lighted bunkhouse doorway. "Listen to this, cowboy. They was a two-gun range tramp bobbed up at a kitchen window few minutes before you walked in with the button. He ast for somethin' to eat, and I shoved a plate o' grub out to him. It was Battery B Greer! This is his kid, ain't it, and you've took on the job o' lookin' after him, ain't you? Yeah, that's plain enough. Well, Rame, jest as sure as anything, Battery B shot Dunc through a window to save you."

"I'll be danged—" gasped the tall cowboy. "Why, that makes it worse, Buckskin. I'm for George Greer, and

I'm for him strong. I'm not sure I want to go free at his expense."

Larimore stared at Rabbit's small figure thoughtfully. "Well—now do somethin' for me, old-timer. Have my hawss ready for me at the big corral gate. I'll want him in about two minutes. And take the button with you. You see, I must have a last word with Miss Dal before I go."

He hastened toward the bunkhouse while Orr picked up the rein of the blind paint and led it off toward the big corral.

IN THE faint light coming through the half-opened bunkhouse door, Larimore saw Dal Evart, her face white and drawn.

"So you went back," she said bleakly. "Like wild birds hatched under a hen; when they're able to fly, they go back, always, to mountain or desert. I'm not so sure I blame you. Maybe you couldn't—just couldn't help it."

He, too, went pale. He stood there staring at her. Within him he knew that he had but to deny the killer accusation and she would accept his word. And yet, he did not deny it.

"Battery B and me," he heard himself saying, "we'll make a fine pair of owlhooters. All George Greer lacks now is nerve. I've got enough nerve for both of us, and then some."

"George Greer, another wild bird."

"Sure," with a queer smile. "I think you'd better keep little Rabbit here, Dal, in spite o' old JE."

He turned and left her as he saw old Buckskin come up with his sorrel cow horse in tow. Instantly there was a swift, fading staccato of hoofbeats in the darkness—Rame Larimore was in the saddle and gone.

Dal Evart went to find Rabbit and led him toward the bunkhouse, his cheap little red-topped boots squeaking as though in protest. Her father saw them in the shaft of lamplight that streamed through the front doorway.

"I told that boy," angrily said old Joab, "I told him—"

"If you run him off, JE," his daughter interrupted, "I'll have to go with him. Because he was Myra's."

Evart was about to speak again when the night was split by a great, ringing call from a point a quarter of a mile away. It was the call of those wild birds of the night, the owlhoot gentry.

"Yay—hoo-oo-oo! Ya-a-a-a-a-ay—hoo!"

"I'm right here with you, *amigo*," Battery B Greer rode up out of the darkness just behind Larimore. "In fact, I've been close to you nearly every minute since the trouble begun. You stuck to my kid, and I won't soon forget it. I was listenin' at a window when you told Dal Evart that you and me would make a fine pair o' owlhooters. So you've got that in your mind, have you?"

"I sure have," Rame said. "Any objections?"

"You're madder than hell right now," Greer pointed out. "Later, you maybe won't be so keen for it. Looks like it's all you got left, I know, but you might find out you're wrong. I listened to a lot o' talk tonight, cowboy. Buckskin Orr thinks I killed Dunc Clore, eh?"

"Well," Larimore blurted, "didn't you?"

"I'll tell you," Battery B growled, "if you'll solemnly swear you'll keep it to yourself, no matter what happens."

"I solemnly swear," breathed Rame.

"All right. I didn't shoot Clore—Kip Farber was square between me and Dunc, that's why," Greer said. "But if it's necessary to keep your neck out o' the noose, I'll swear that I did it. And now maybe you can figure the reason I asked for that promise. There's got to be somebody besides a woman, and somebody a lot more decent than me, to look after Rabbit. And you're elected."

"I—" began Larimore, and stopped. "But who the devil got Clore, if you didn't?" he asked then.

Battery B shrugged in the gloom. "Cowboy, listen. That scrap was fast and jumbled. Nearly anybody could 'a' done it, and you wouldn't seen, what with all the powder smoke. Shot square between the eyes, so it could hardly have been a wild bullet. Might even 'a' been Kip Farber. He's handy at shootin' from the hip. Didn't it just happen to occur to you that maybe Dunc knowed more about Kip sellin' JE beef to the Mexes than you did, and maybe was makin' Kip pay him a heap for not talkin'? Nice way to shut Dunc's mouth for good, wasn't it?"

"Well, it's somethin' to think about, I'll admit, though I sure wouldn't bet you're right," muttered Larimore. He changed the subject. "I'm hopin', Greer, that Joab Evart will reconsider and keep Rabbit. It's the best place on earth for him, there with Miss Dal. She's just simply—there never was anybody else like her, Greer."

"Yeah, there was—one like her," the older man said quickly, almost whispering. "Cowboy, I know. And I'm sure wishin' you luck. . . ."

THEY rode a long time in silence. Then Rame said thoughtfully, "You overlooked somethin', Battery B. It was big, you offerin' to stick your neck in the noose to save mine; but by doin' that you'd be disgracin' the kid, don't you see? You wouldn't want folks pointin' to him and sayin': 'His daddy was hung.' And so we've got to be damned smart and find out exactly who got Dunc Clore, and prove it."

"Fine," hooted Greer. "How?"

"I don't know," Rame confessed. "But listen, the sheriff won't get to the JE for a good hour. I didn't get my warbag and blanket, and I'll need 'em. If you'll stand guard while I'm gettin' my stuff, I'll look around in the bunkhouse for sign while I'm there."

When Larimore walked into the bunkhouse, Greer covered him from an open window.

With the crew watching silently, Rame hastened through the business of packing his warbag and rolling it compactly in his blanket. Then he walked back to the rear, where Dunc Clore lay as he had fallen. He knelt for a closer look, turned the body half over.

"You ain't supposed to do that!" growled the range boss.

"Yeah, stop him!" came from a window opposite Farber. The barrels of two guns lay across the sill. Suddenly Larimore exclaimed: "I'll be damned!" and turned the limp body back to its former face-upward position.

He looked toward the dark window that framed the head and shoulders of George Greer, said: "On your toes now, *amigo*," and walked, not to his bunk for his bedroll but to Sneak Truby's bunk for the little rider.

"Let's go, rat-face," he growled, and caught Truby by the collar, swung him out and to his feet. Kip Farber sprang up.

"What you aimin' to do with him?"

"Hang him, maybe," Larimore said. "Come on, rat!"

As one man, the range boss and his friends moved to Truby's aid. They knew very well that Battery B Greer, dangerous as he was, wouldn't shoot into the crowd for fear of hitting Larimore.

Rame's six cowboy friends swept into the fist-and-boot battle. Greer hurried through the window and wielded the barrels of his gun like iron clubs. It helped. Soon Larimore's side had kicked and beaten its way out of the bunkhouse with Truby. Greer's two Colts kept the Farber men back.

"We're goin' with you, Rame," said a squat cowboy at Larimore's elbow.

WHEN Joab Evart came hurrying to the bunkhouse, they were gone. Farber was queerly morose. He wouldn't talk about the new ruckus. But Buckskin Orr did. Orr led Evart off toward the corral and told him what Larimore had said about Farber's selling off cattle and pocketing the money.

At that JE merely stiffened, although his eyes glinted dangerously. He was ready to go back to the ranch house to his long argument with Dal over Rabbit Greer's staying there when the rider he had sent to Manzanita City returned with word that the sheriff was out of town.

Rame Larimore rode at the head of the little cavalcade that made its way into the dark hills a few minutes later. On his saddle before him he carried the now disarmed Sneak Truby, who was shaking as though with an ague. Beside Larimore rode big George Greer, carrying a coiled rope that Sneak could see dimly.

They stopped beside a creek, kindled a bright fire of dry brushwood. Larimore knotted the rope about Truby's scrawney neck while Greer tied his ankles and wrists.

"Now," said Rame, tossing the free end of the rope over a tree branch, "you can start talkin'. First, who all knows about Kip Farber sellin' off JE beef on the sly? Got to have witnesses, you know, when it comes up in court."

Larimore meant this simply as an opening wedge. If Truby began talking, Rame figured, likely he could be scared into going on. But Truby was not quite the weakling he appeared to be. It was midnight when he named three of Farber's pets.

"All right," said the master of ceremonies. "Now, boys, get ready for a long, hard pull on that rope, You, Sneak. You're the bummest shot in the outfit. Tell us how come you was able to hit Dunc Clore square between the eyes like you did?"

The others gasped in amazement at that. Truby, more shaken than ever, stammered: "But I—I didn't! I—I couldn't! I was outside then, at Clore's back, he was shot from the front!"

"Oh, no, he wasn't," flatly disputed Larimore. "He was shot from behind, and the bullet come out in front. Bigger hole where it come out than where it went in; that's what I saw when I turned Dunc over. You was the only man behind Clore. All right, boys, start pullin' the rope!"

It didn't work. After two hours, it hadn't worked. Rame, in spite of himself, became sorry for Truby. He took the noose from Sneak's neck, then he beckoned Greer out of the circle of firelight and whispered wearily:

"He's guilty, Battery B. I'd take oath on it. Can you think o' any other way o' gettin' the truth out of him?"

Greer swore. "I'm afraid not, Rame."

AT SUNRISE on the next morning, Buckskin Orr went to the ranch house and found Joab Evart gloomily pacing the living room floor.

"That kid, the little devil," flared JE, "he has a six-gun that he stole from the bunkhouse inside his shirt, and he won't give it up!"

Orr spoke grimly. "The hombre you sent after the sheriff, he brung back six bottles o' forty-rod rye, and them o' the crew that didn't leave with Rame is right now fightin' drunk—yeah, Kip Farber too—and they're all ridin' out on you. They'll soon be here askin' for their pay!"

Evart was already mad clean to the bone. He took a Winchester rifle from a corner. "They'll get it on the fifteenth, regular payday, and not before!"

"I figger," Old Buckskin pursued, "that Kip is countin' on Larimore squeezin' enough truth out o' Sneak Truby to outlaw him—Kip, I mean.

There's the beef-stealin', y'know, and mebbe he had somethin' to do with killin' Dunc Clore. You'll remember that Kip hisself hired the men that's stickin' to him. They're bad 'uns, too. Drunk, they'll do anything. Better pay 'em now, JE."

"I've not got half enough money here, even if I wanted to pay 'em now!"

There was a squeaking of small boots. Rabbit Greer walked in with Dal Evart. They had overheard. Rabbit said: "I can shoot, grampaw. I—"

"Shut up," roared JE and walked to the front door to look toward the bunkhouse. He saw thirteen men coming, their gait none too steady, with Kip Farber in the lead. Dal and Old Buckskin saw too, and hurried to close and bar the doors that opened on side and rear galleries. Soon the thirteen drew up at the front gallery steps. Farber voiced their demands at once. He was bent upon getting away before the sheriff came.

"If you ain't got the money, JE," he snarled, "we take it in cattle."

"You," hotly replied JE, "have already taken it in cattle!"

His eyes blazed. He brought his Winchester up level. Sober, Kip Farber would have known that Evart didn't mean to shoot just yet. But half drunk, with fear driving him, Kip snaked his six-gun from leather and jerked the barrel toward Evart. Barely in time a big Colt roared from a window near old Joab.

Evart's Winchester bellowed. Outside, three six-guns crashed. Then Farber and his men ran for the shelter of the nearby cottonwoods. Farber had dropped his gun. He stumbled and fell, lay clawing at his wounded right shoulder.

"I—got him—" came in a fading boyish voice. Rabbit Greer wilted into a small heap under the window. His gaunt, bearded grandfather went slowly toward him whispering: "He saved me . . . He saved me, as sure as hell . . ."

Dimly then he heard a great shout in the cottonwoods, a booming order to reach for blue sky.

EVART was dazed. He couldn't think. He couldn't even hear now. When he came to himself, he sat with the boy on his lap, and Dal was bathing a bullet bruise on the button's forehead. Rabbit grinned up at him and the heart of old Joab leaped in his breast. Beside his chair stood Rame Larimore, also grinning, and a very solemn George Greer. Rame spoke.

"The sheriff arrived too late, JE, but Battery B didn't. We heard the shootin' as we rode in. Greer got there first, and how he did bust arms and legs! The sheriff and my six *amigos* is takin' Kip and his crowd, includin' Sneak Truby, to jail.

"Sneak talked. Know what a bum shot he is? Well, he swears Kip had already primed him to knock me off, and that when he shot Dunc he was shootin' at me!"

Larimore noted that Dal had risen and was smiling at him. They walked off together. Evart looked toward George Greer.

"Battery B, I've stopped bein' a fool. We'll make a range boss out o' you. Law hasn't got anything on you now, nor need ever have. I—What? Rame? Look in the dinin' room there at him and Dal holdin' hands. You can guess what it means. He'll soon be takin' my place in the outfit."

Greer bent his shaggy head in relief and gratitude. Evart called, "Hey, Rame! How the devil did you ever manage to make Truby talk?"

"Well," drawled Larimore, "he was little and nervous and ticklish, and I decided to use little and nervous and ticklish tactics. I simply took his boots off and tickled the bottoms of his feet with a foxtail grass top."

WAR ON THE RANGE

Honest men were hanged as rustlers on that boss-ruled range—until Dave Carmack, fugitive cowboy with nothing to lose rode the midnight trails to throw the fear of Satan into Gus Noll, gun-lord.

BORROWED GUNS

by Crawford Sullivan

THEY were hanging two rustlers the day Dave Carmack rode into Dobietown. Two ropes dangled from the Spanish oak next to the blacksmith shop, and a crowd had gathered around the tree, waiting for the prisoners to be brought from the jail across the street. Carmack snubbed his horse to a rack in front of the saloon and mingled with the crowd.

The onlookers were mostly men: hard-bitten, grizzled men. They stood murmuring quietly with thumbs hooked over gun belts, lean jaws tense. Carmack pushed his way forward. He saw a pair of saddled ponies nibbling grass beneath the oak. A fat, red-faced individual held their halters and growled commands at the crowd. "Stand back," he ordered. "Give the varmints a chance to swing. Yuh'd think this mob had never been to a hangin'—"

An Action Novelette

Sorrowful threatened to blow the sheriff's brains out!

Dave Carmack had seen enough. As he heeled around, he noticed a girl in a blue gingham dress standing by his side.

She was thin-lipped, trembling. Her face was chalky, and her wide brown eyes stared straight ahead. She swayed back and forth unsteadily, and for a moment Carmack thought she would collapse. He tapped her gently on the shoulder.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said. "If I were you I'd get home quick. Hangings aren't very enjoyable to look at. Especially when it's just a couple of cheap rustlers."

"I'll be all right," she replied dully.

"I just noticed you seem kind of shaky," Carmack explained. "If you feel that way now, it won't help any when the sheriff snaps leather against those ponies' flanks. Better let me help you home."

She did not answer. Her eyes remained glued on the ropes dangling loosely from the tree. Suddenly she swung back on him. "I can't go!" she cried. "One of those men is my father! And he's not a rustler!"

Carmack's face became flushed. "I'm—I'm sorry, miss—"

The condemned men were brought from the jail, walked slowly across

the dusty street through a lane that had formed in the crowd.

Leading the way was a white-headed man with a long beaklike nose and snowy mustache. The old man's hands were tied at his back; but he carried himself straight as a poplar. He looked from side to side, as if searching for something. When he discovered the girl in blue gingham, his chin quivered. He stared at her intently; then turned away, head high. The girl sobbed brokenly.

Behind the old man came a tall, gangling person whose long horsey face wore an expression of profound sadness and desolation. Sheriff Ike Bandliss followed in the rear with two armed deputies.

When the prisoners reached the tree, Ike Bandliss turned to the white-headed man and said: "Noll Leslie, we're gonna hang you for rustlin' Gus Pell's cattle. Before we begin—have you or your partner, Sorrowful Jones, got any last words?"

Noll Leslie looked first at the sheriff and then at the red-faced man who held the ponies. "Where's Gus Pell?" he inquired. "I see Sheriff Bandliss an' Barney Rad — but where's Pell?"

Barney Rad jerked at the bridles. "Pell's over in the town hall," was the reply. "He don't like to breathe the same air as cow thieves. Neither do I. So let's get this done with—"

"Wait a minute," the tall, woeful prisoner broke in. "Before you send me to Glory, I got a request. I want to roll one more cigarette 'fore I die."

"That's a fool request," grumbled Sheriff Bandliss. "It'll take too much time—"

Dave Carmack, who had only looked on so far, now stepped from the crowd. "You can give a dying man five minutes!" he said.

He took a small tobacco sack from his vest pocket and twisted the drawstring around his forefinger. The sheriff eyed him curiously.

Carmack was a young man whose appearance demanded attention. Although of medium build, he possessed a square, steady jaw and clear gray eyes that suggested hidden strength. He walked with an easy, rolling stride; moved his hands quickly and gracefully. Whether he was shooting, riding or mixing a deck of cards, Carmack always kept every muscle and sinew under perfect control. His easy, cat-like motions might have branded him as a gunman or a gambler, had it not been for his hands. Carmack's hands were rough, hardened by toil. His breeches, vest and hat-brim were caked with dust, showing that he had ridden long and hard that morning.

"Who're you?" said Ike Bandliss bluntly.

"Dave Carmack," was the drawling reply. "Don't tell me you've forgotten—"

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff. "Jack Carmack's kid! You left Dobietown when you was sixteen."

"I'm back now," said Dave. "Seems I dropped in at the wrong time. I'd rather not have seen this. Noll Leslie was my father's friend."

Ike Bandliss gave a mirthless laugh. "Things have changed around here since your old man died," he stated. "You'll find that out when—"

"How about my cigarette?" demanded Sorrowful Jones. "You can gab when we're kickin'."

"Yeah. Let him roll a smoke," said someone in the crowd.

GRUDGINGLY, the sheriff loosed the ropes on the tall prisoner's wrists. Sorrowful Jones stretched his long arms. Dave Carmack handed him the tobacco sack and reached into his vest pocket for some papers.

Carmack's right arm was up; his elbow crooked to an awkward position. From the holster at his belt a black gun butt protruded temptingly.

Jones did not look directly at the gun; but saw it out the corner of his eye. His skinny fingers swooped to Carmack's belt. As he drew the gun, he jumped back, knocking Ike Bandliss off balance. Jones's left arm caught Bandliss around the neck, and the gun jerked up to the sheriff's forehead.

"Don't nobody move!" rasped Jones. "If there's airy shot fired, I'll spatter Ike's brains all over the ground! Carmack! You untie Noll."

Dave Carmack nodded bewilderedly and removed Noll Leslie's bonds. The old man's mustache bristled and he took the gun from Ike's holster.

The crowd watched the proceedings silently. Guns were out; but no man dared fire while Jones held the sheriff in front of him with the pistol prodding Bandliss's temple. Noll Leslie kept a watchful eye on the marshals—and especially on Barney Rad, who still clutched the ponies' reins, his beefy face blanched white.

Ike Bandliss was a small man, and it was an easy matter for Sorrowful Jones to hoist him onto one of the ponies. "Now, I want everybody to stay right here till we git away," said Jones. "We're takin' Ike with us. But he won't be hurt none—providin' you don't try to follow!"

In an instant he was in the saddle, clasping the sheriff with his gun arm. Noll Leslie took the reins from Rad, tossed them over the horses' heads. Heels thumped against horseflesh. The riders edged around the crowd; then galloped down the dusty road which extended to the hills west of Dobietown. As they rounded Settler's Oak, Ike Bandliss was dropped sprawling into the dust.

"Follow 'em, men!" yelled the sheriff. "You can't let 'em get away like that!"

The crowd seemed to be divided. Some found horses and started with Ike Bandliss in pursuit. Others straggled off to the saloon talking loudly, as men do when relieved of a great emotional strain.

Barney Rad was furious. "Somebody'll answer for this!" he stormed. "Wait till Gus Pell hears what happened—"

"Come on, Rad, have a drink," suggested a cow puncher. "Personally, I was glad to see 'em get away."

Rad refused to be quieted. "It's all the fault of that hombre there!" he shouted, pointing at Carmack. "Damn awkward greener! First time I ever seen a man get his own gun taken away from him!"

"The same thing might have happened to you," Carmack told him. "I'll show you. Draw."

Rad's hand fell to his holster. Before his fingers could touch the gun butt, Carmack's arm darted out swiftly. Rad slapped empty leather. Pointed at his left eye was the muzzle of his own .38.

"Now you've seen it happen twice," said Carmack, returning the gun. Barney Rad burned crimson and stalked away cursing.

The girl came through the crowd, pushing her way toward Dave Carmack. Color had returned to the girl's cheeks; her lips were full and red. "You did it on purpose," she said. "I know you did—and I want to thank you."

"Nothing of the kind," Carmack shook his head. "Sorrowful Jones was just too quick for me. But I hope your dad gets away, Miss Peggy."

"You remember me then?" she said eagerly.

"Guess you've grown up some since I left," he grinned. "And since you quit braiding your hair, you've turned right pretty. Don't believe I could forget that dimple in your chin."

She grasped his hand warmly. "Why did you come back?" she asked. "You once said that you wouldn't return until you'd made a fortune."

"I made it," Carmack said lightly.

"After ten years of prowling through the Sierras I found a rich vein. I took out all the gold I needed and stuck it in a Nevada bank. Now I'm back in Dobietown—ready to settle down and take over my dad's ranch."

"You mean—the Circle C?"

"Sure," nodded Carmack. "My dad left it to me when he died. I suppose the ranch is sort of run down by now, but I'll—"

"Have you seen Gus Pell?" she interrupted.

Carmack shook his head. "No. Who's he?"

The girl's face became troubled. "He's the one who ruined my father," she said gravely. "Pell filed a claim on our ranch, the Lazy Eight. There was some kind of a legal mixup—and Barney Rad, the county recorder, said that Pell's claim was valid. So they sold the cattle at auction and put us off the ranch."

"But how did they convict Noll of rustling?" asked Carmack.

"He and Sorrowful Jones went back to the ranch one night," she explained. "They did try to steal some cattle. I don't know why. But anyway, Gus Pell's men caught them, and Ike Bandliss saw to it that they were convicted."

"Seems like this Pell gent has things his own way around here," mused Carmack. "He'd better not try to grab the Circle C."

"You came back too late, Dave," said Peg Leslie. "Pell took possession of the Circle C right after Jack Carmack died!"

Carmack looked at her sharply, moistened his lips with his tongue. Finally he said, "Where can I find Gus Pell?"

"Hey, Carmack!" Barney Rad's voice blared across the street. "Come over to my office. Gus Pell wants to see yuh."

"Please be careful," the girl begged, pressing her fingers against his arms. "Pell is a dangerous man."

Dave Carmack smiled gently. "I can handle him," he said. He turned, and his spur rowels clinked up little puffs of dust from the street. The smile had become stony, grim.

CHAPTER II
The Big Boss

A TWO-STORY, peak roofed structure stood close to the Dobietown jail. It was painted gray, and it contained a court room and five offices. The building was called the Town Hall; but it also housed the offices of the sheriff and recorder, for Dobietown was the seat of Greenbush county.

"This way," said Barney Rad, as Carmack reached the splintery front stoop. He motioned Carmack into a dark, musty hall. On the right was an office; the door labeled "County Recorder."

Barney Rad trailed Carmack into the office. The place was bare, gloomy. A solitary beam of sunshine stabbed through a torn place in the window shade. Steel filing cabinets hugged the dingy brown wall.

Slouched behind a nicked table sat a man of giant proportions. The man's elbows rested on the table, and his face was cupped in broad palms. Carmack could not see his features, for a wide-brimmed hat was pulled over the man's forehead. He did, however, get a glimpse of bluish-black whiskers which glinted in the straying sun rays.

"Here he is, Gus," said Barney Rad, edging Carmack closer to the table. "This is the hombre who gave his gun to Sorrowful Jones."

"Your name's Dave Carmack?"

Gus Pell spoke with a heavy, dissonant rumble, as though he had stones in his throat. Without waiting for Carmack to answer, he said. "What are you doin' in Dobietown?"

"I own the Circle C ranch," Car-

mack returned casually. "That's reason enough for me being here."

Pell kept talking down at the table. "The Circle C doesn't belong to you," he stated.

"Excuse me for calling you a liar," Carmack said calmly. "But my grandfather settled on this territory when other white men were sticking to the Santa Fe. He got one of the first Spanish land grants issued in the United Sta—"

"That was your grandfather," Pell cut in. "When the territory was taken over by the United States, it was opened to squatters. But two of the old settlers didn't think it was necessary to re-establish their claims. Noll Leslie was one—and your old man, Jack Carmack, was the other!"

"Yeah," chimed Barney Rad. "All county records are kept here. And there's no record of any land belonging to Jack Carmack."

"You see," grumbled Pell softly, "I've taken over both the Circle C and Lazy Eight. And my claim is good. We threw Leslie off the property last September; but Jack Carmack saved us the trouble by dyin'."

"I happen to know that my dad *did* take out a claim," insisted Carmack. "A long time ago."

"No use arguin'," growled Pell. "You've got a thousand dollars comin' to you—from the cattle that were sold at auction. Take the money an' get out of town!" He opened a drawer and plumped a roll of bills on the table.

"Is that all you have to say?" inquired Carmack.

"That's all. Except that if you're not out of town before sunset—"

Dave Carmack flared up. "You know what you can do with that money!" he snapped. "I'm staying here. What's more. I'm taking over the Circle C. I'm not poor. I'll fight you to the last ditch for that land—with lawyers or bullets. Take your pick!"

Gus Pell said nothing for several seconds. He remained slouched at the table, holding his head in his hands. Barney Rad stood at Carmack's side breathing heavily. Carmack remembered his empty holster. He was at the mercy of these men if they chose to kill.

Pell seemed to read his mind. "No," he said. "I've got no gun. Anyhow, you'd be harder to get rid of dead than alive." He placed both hands on the table and looked squarely at Carmack for the first time.

The narrow, slanting eyes leering from under the hat brim were glittery, malevolent. Pell's broad mouth was rimmed by a dense black beard, pointed, Satanic.

Slowly, one gnarled hand slid into the table drawer. Pell nodded meaningly at Barney Rad. Rad scuffled out the door and locked it from the outside. As Pell's hand emerged from the drawer, Carmack saw that the fingers were folded around a short-handled horsewhip.

"I think you'll see things my way," said Gus Pell, shoving back his chair. He stood up, flexed his huge shoulders and let the whip dangle like a rippling snake. "I whip mules when they're stubborn," he rasped. "Usually it works the same with men—"

HIS ARM lashed out over the table, and the whip cracked like a gunshot. Carmack jumped aside, but the tail of the whip sliced blood from his cheek. Eyes rolling, Pell struck again. The leather whistled. Carmack felt it cut into his legs, sting his shoulder. He danced back agilely, dodging the blows as they came. His back touched the wall, and Pell advanced grinning.

Now there was no retreat. No matter which way Carmack moved, the cutting, whizzing whip would bite flesh. Clenching his teeth, he dove forward.

Pell swung the whip with a criss-cross motion, trying to force Carmack

back against the wall. With every lash Carmack's body jerked. Shielding his face with one arm, Carmack grasped out for the snapping leather. The tip caught his wrist; coiled around it twice. He grabbed the whip with his fingers and held it steady for an instant. Pell gave a sharp tug, and the thong slid from Carmack's grasp.

As Pell struck again, Carmack lunged for his throat. The swift, straight-arm blow smashed into the giant's face. Pell tottered on his heels; barreled the whip wildly. But the big man's first opportunity was gone. Carmack had slipped under his guard, and the long, coiling weapon was nearly useless.

Boring in close, Carmack jabbed short punches at Pell's hairy chin and cracked knuckles against the pudgy nose until it spurted crimson. Pell grunted with rage, threw down the whip and thudded his lumpy fists into Carmack's midriff.

Carmack avoided most of the blows with a graceful, slithering motion; but he was not fighting defensively. His single thought was to gain quick revenge for the horsewhipping administered by this bearded giant. Lefts and rights poured into Pell's face like cannon balls smacking wet earth. Pell retreated, swinging awkwardly. Carmack clipped his ear; then bashed him full in the mouth. Pell sprawled across the table top and kicked at Carmack with both feet. The kick sent Carmack staggering. As Pell crawled off the table, Carmack picked up the discarded whip.

Pell's puffed eyes became tense with fear when he saw the whip slash down. He turned the table end-up and crouched behind it. Carmack whanged the whip sidewards, bringing a long, livid mark to Pell's neck. Pell bolted toward the door. "Barney!" he shouted, rattling the knob. "Barney Rad!"

The door opened, and Barney Rad entered, gun in hand. Carmack cracked the whip across Rad's knuckles, spinning the gun to the floor. Rad howled with pain. Pell shoved him out of the way and sprinted down the hall. Rad appeared dazed, then started running wildly after Gus Pell.

Dave Carmack tossed the whip away; picked up Rad's gun and shoved it into his holster. By the time he reached the town hall entrance, Pell and Rad had disappeared. Carmack rubbed his bleeding face and considered his next move.

A few moments later he untied his pony from the saloon hitch rail, swung into the saddle and headed for the Circle C ranch.

CHAPTER III
The Old Homestead

DAVE CARMACK'S heart gave a queer flutter when he sighted the rooftops of the Circle C. It looked about the same: the white ranch house with its two adobe chimneys, the long "cook-shack," and the large corral flanked by a whitewashed wing fence. On both sides of the road green pasture lands swept toward the horizon; and straight ahead, directly above a wreath of smoke curling from the ranch house chimney, loomed the brown peak of Old Padrino.

This was the land where Dave Carmack had first seen sunlight. To the south, by the curve of Bluewater Creek, was a green plot dotted with stone crosses. Those crosses marked all that was left of the Carmack family—all except Dave. And Gus Pell had tried to tell him that the land wasn't his!

A group of men were perched on the corral bars when Carmack rode through the gate. Among the swarthy faces there was not one which Carmack recognized. He tied his horse by

a water trough and strode toward the main house.

"Davie! Davie Carmack!"

Carmack turned. Loping from the corral on bandy legs came a wrinkle-faced cowhand. Carmack needed no second look to recognize Chaunce Haines, his father's ranch foreman. "Chaunce!" he exclaimed. "You dried-up old maverick!"

Brown hands clasped in a fervent welcome. "Dawggone!" exploded the old man through toothless gums. "I knowed you'd be back. Your dad said so before he died. Wanted me to take care of the ranch for you, he did."

"Well, I'm here," said Carmack. "And you're still straw boss."

Chaunce Haines looked disturbed. "No, I ain't," he replied glumly. "When Gus Pell took the ranch over, all the old hands was fired. He let me stay on to do odd chores. He brought a bunch of greasers from over the line. An' two weeks ago a new foreman came—"

"Who's the new man?" demanded Carmack. "I want to see him."

"Folks say he's a gunman," Chaunce said. "He can shoot quicker'n a buzzard lightin' on a dead cow. Velasquez, his name is."

"I've got business with Velasquez," Carmack said. "Point him out."

Chaunce Haines grasped his arm and led him toward the corral. They were met half way by a tall, shifty-eyed Mexican with a black bandana around his throat. The man was handsome, well-groomed, and his mouth was puckered into a self-satisfied smirk.

"You are looking for someone, *Señor?*"

"Are you Velasquez, the foreman?" Carmack asked.

The man nodded.

"This is Mr. Carmack," Chaunce Haines hastened to explain. "His dad was—"

"I 'ave heard of *Señor* Carmack," Velasquez smiled. "Someday I should be very glad to converse with him. But at present I am occupied—"

"You listen to what I say," scowled Carmack. "It's only two words. *You're fired!*"

"Fired?" Velasquez's smile was pitying. "Surely *Señor* Carmack does not believe he can discharge me—"

"I'm the owner of this ranch," Carmack told him. "And I say you're fired. Get out of here, and take your gang of *vaqueros* with you!"

"I take orders from no one but *Señor* Pell," Velasquez swaggered. "You are trespassing on Pell's property. If I were to kill you—the law would be on my side."

"Maybe it would," agreed Carmack. "The lobo law that's sprung up around this country since I left seems to be on the side of thieves and tinhorn killers!"

"Careful," warned Velasquez, blood mounting to his high temples. "I take no insults from any man."

"Cool off, Davie," Chaunce Haines said nervously. "Velasquez is a gunman. That's why Pell hired him—"

"I don't believe he could hit the broad side of a hen coop," Carmack sneered. "I came here to run my ranch—and no long-haired greaser can bluff me down!"

Velasquez stepped back a few paces. Beads of sweat stood out on his coppered skin. His small black eyes snapped with anger as he stared at the cool, square-jawed young man before him. Carmack's lips twisted to a defiant curl. Dave well understood that Velasquez was a killer. The notched .45 hanging in an open-toed holster told him that the Mexican was adept in the art of "gun-tipping."

Seconds dragged by—both men glaring silently. Carmack toyed with a button on his leather vest. Velasquez's hand hung limply at his side. Chaunce Haines stepped to a safe distance. For an instant it seemed that a glimmer of fear crept over Velasquez's face. Then his features became

hard, cruel. The narrow chin clamped firmly, and his fingers darted up to the holster.

CARMACK'S arm swooped so quickly that the movement was almost imperceptible. Flame spat from his hip a split second before Velasquez could tip the open holster. The Mexican's hat skimmed into the dust, and Velasquez folded to the ground, blood spilling from a gash in his scalp.

The men roosting on the corral came running. A clatter of hoofbeats sounded from behind. Carmack turned and saw Gus Pell thundering past the ranch gate, leaning forward in the saddle of a black horse. Behind him was Barney Rad.

Chaunce Haines rolled Velasquez over and placed a hand on the fallen man's chest. "He ain't breathin', Davie," he said excitedly. "You've kilt him!"

"I saw this, Carmack! Saw it from the road!" Gus Pell fairly yelled the words as he tumbled his big frame from the saddle. "I figured you'd be here causin' trouble. Killed him in cold blood! You'll swing for it, too!"

The ranch hands swarmed around, jabbering in Mexican. Carmack pushed them aside and started for his horse. This was no time for explanation. By shooting Velasquez he had played directly into Gus Pell's hand. His best move was to break for the open as quickly as possible, before Pell could have him locked in jail. By now he knew what to expect of Dobietown justice.

Barney Rad snatched at his arm. "No, yuh don't, Carmack," he snarled. "We got yuh right this time, an' we're gonna turn yuh over to the sheriff. Gimme that gun—pronto!"

Carmack rammed a straight punch at Rad's jaw. Rad fell to the dust and instinctively clawed at his empty holster. Carmack sprinted toward his horse. "Stop him!" Rad howled.

Gus Pell whipped out a newly acquired six-gun. The shots whined over Carmack's head as he gained the saddle. The pony reared, snorted. Carmack slashed his spurs across the animal's flank, bent low across the brown mane and headed for the ranch gate.

"After him, men!" barked Pell, waving his gun in a wide sweep. He straddled the black horse and galloped in pursuit. The *vaqueros* scuttled for the hitch rack and stables. In a few seconds they were mounted and following Pell.

WHEN Carmack reached a hillock above the ranch houses, he looked over his shoulder and saw Gus Pell racing up the road behind him. Swarming through the ranch gate came a score of armed riders. Carmack breezed over the hill; angled his pony into a clump of brush at the bottom. A few yards distant trickled the shallow flow of Bluewater Creek. Carmack rode along the pebbled creek bed until he found the old cow trail leading to Grass Meadow. The sun was sinking behind Old Padrino. If he could keep going until nightfall, Pell would never catch up with him.

Pell roared over the hilltop in time to see Carmack swerve off into the brush. Suspecting a trick, he reined up and waited for his followers to join him. Shouting advice and warnings, the band of horsemen plunged through the underbrush, picked up Carmack's trail, lost it again when they came to the creek. Riders started along the creek bed in both directions.

It was Barney Rad who spotted fresh shoe prints on the old cow path.

"He went this way!" Rad shouted. "He's headin' for Grass Meadow!"

But Pell's men had lost valuable seconds. The sun was fast disappearing, dropping behind the jagged ridge of mountains. The sky faded from blue to gray in a brief western twilight. Then darkness swept over the rolling prairie.

On the edge of Grass Meadow, the riders stopped by a gully and bunched into a huddle. Pell leaned back against the cantle of his saddle; lit a cigarette. In the flickering match glow, his bluish beard shone like steel.

"No use tryin' to follow him any further," he grunted. "Carmack knew we couldn't ride across this land at night without bustin' our necks. The meadow's punched full of gopher holes!"

"He's prob'ly half way to the state line by now," grumbled Barney Rad, feeling his bruised jaw.

"I think he'll be back," Pell predicted. "And when he does show up we'll string him to the highest tree in Dobietown!"

"We can have Sheriff Bandliss post a reward for him. Two hundred dollars—dead or alive!" suggested Rad. "Too bad the way he shot up Velasquez—"

"Velasquez deserved what he got," snorted Pell. "I hired him as a gunman, and the damn fool gets himself killed the first crack out of the box! We'll make that reward five hundred dollars!"

The riders turned back, and soon the jangle of spurs, the creak of leather was lost in the velvety night. When they were gone, Dave Carmack crawled from his hiding place in the gully bottom and mounted the pony he had tied to a fence rail at the other side of Grass Meadow.

"Five hundred dollars reward—" he mused, heading the pony back.

CHAPTER IV
Blood Money

PEG LESLIE lived alone in a one-room frame house near the end of Dobietown's main street. Her father bought the place years ago for a feed barn. That was when stage coaches posted at Dobietown and good alfalfa sold at a premium. But now the square, cracker-box structure had been transformed into a habitable dwelling; clean as a pin, with lacy curtains hanging from the one front window. Since Noll Leslie lost his ranch, his daughter made a small living by sewing for a few of the local housewives. That night, she was seated by an oil lamp, jabbing her needle into a plaid cloth when she heard a tapping noise at the window. Dave Carmack's dust-smeared face peered through the glass. Hastily she threw open the door.

"Dave—" she exclaimed—"what's happened? That cut on your cheek and—" Then with sudden conviction: "It was Gus Pell. You've quarreled with him!"

Carmack threw himself onto a chair wearily. "Yes," he nodded. "Pell tried to horsewhip me out of town. I gave him a dose of his own medicine and rode over to the Circle C. Did you ever hear of Velasquez?"

"The gunman?" Her eyes became very large and round. "They say Pell hired him to manage the Circle C. You didn't—"

"I killed him this afternoon," Carmack said. "Didn't mean to. I shot for his shoulder; but the bullet went high. I used Barney Rad's gun. It was too light. Hadn't had time to get the feel of it."

"You'd better leave town, quick!" she told him. "When Pell hears about it, he'll—"

"Pell was there," Carmack said. "I got away, but they'll be combing the country for me tomorrow."

"If I could only help—"

"Maybe you can," he considered. "Have you any idea where your father and Sorrowful Jones might be hiding?"

She pondered over it for a moment. "Before they were caught," she said, "they had a hideout on the side of Old Padrino. Dad told me that when he was in jail. Maybe they are there—if they got away from the posse. But I don't know exactly where the place is."

"Perhaps I can find it," replied Carmack. "I'll need a fresh horse."

"My pony's in the back shed," she offered. "You can have him. Why do you want to find my father?"

"I've got a plan," Carmack said. "If it works out, I believe we can beat Pell at his game of land-grabbing."

"I hope you're right," Peg said. "But you can't leave till you've eaten something. You must be starved!"

AN HOUR later, refreshed by his first square meal that day, Dave Carmack slapped his saddle across Peg Leslie's paint pony and took the westward trail which skirts the southmost end of the Circle C. As he rode, his thoughts were full of the slender, brown-eyed girl who had befriended him. Peg Leslie was unlike any other woman he had ever met. Quiet, gentle, she was soothing to him—like the cool, sage-laden breeze whispering over the prairie.

A flood of memories swirled through his brain. He recalled how, as children, they rode daily the stretch along Bluewater Creek—how Noll Leslie and Jack Carmack used to nod their grizzled heads and make plans for the future. "It'll be a great weddin'," Noll Leslie would say. "My gal, Peg—an' your Dave. We'll merge the Lazy Eight an' Circle C. Those kids will be the biggest land owners in the whole blamed state."

Dave Carmack dug his heels into the pony's sides. Somehow he intended to get that property back. Just now it seemed almost impossible. By killing Velasquez, he had become an outlaw, a murderer. There would be no chance of pleading self defense—not with Gus Pell around.

A bright moon popped up over the prairie as Carmack reached the base of Old Padrino. The moonlight made it easier to ride, easier to find the trail leading up the mountainside. Half way to the top, the trail forked in three directions. Carmack took the left fork. It led to the south range, past Silver Falls. A camp near the falls would offer plenty of water, a broad view of the plains and an avenue of escape to the south. Carmack felt certain that if Noll Leslie were hiding on the mountain, he would be close to Silver Falls.

Coveys of quail whirred from the underbrush. Soon Carmack heard the tinkling splash of the falls. Moon rays glistened on the squat, cone-shaped pines, and the trail became a fuzzy gray ribbon. Rounding a bend, Carmack drew up on his reins. Standing in the center of the trail, feet apart, was a tall, black-coated man. A blue-steel gun barrel flashed from his hip.

"Put 'em up, stranger," ordered the man. "An' sit still on your horse."

"Watch that trigger," advised Carmack. "It's filed pretty fine. Least touch and it goes off."

Sorrowful Jones lowered the gun. "Carmack!" he grunted. "How'd *you* get here?"

"Rode," answered Dave calmly. "I came for the gun you borrowed."

"I seen you comin' up the trail an hour ago," said Jones. "Hey, Noll! Look who's here." He took hold of Carmack's bridle and led him along the trail.

Noll Leslie was waiting by the falls with two saddled horses. His hands trembled as Carmack squeezed it. "It's good to see you again, boy," he muttered brokenly. "Sorrowful and

me aren't forgettin' what you did for us."

"He winked at me when he brought out the tobacco sack," stated Sorrowful positively. "I knew he meant for me to grab the gun."

"We gave the sheriff a good chase," said Noll Leslie. "Lost him before we got to the hills."

"What I don't understand," said Carmack, "is how they convicted you of rustling. Was it another of Pell's frame-ups?"

NOLL LESLIE bobbed his gray head. "It's a long story, Dave," he said. "When Pell came here two years ago, I knew he wasn't up to any good. Him, Ike Bandliss and Barney Rad got thicker'n thieves. One day they blew in at the Lazy Eight with a legal paper sayin' that the ranch belonged to Pell. Said something about an old Spanish grant that hadn't been renewed."

"Yeah," Carmack said. "Pell told me the same thing."

"He was lyin', boy," Noll Leslie growled. "Your dad an' me took out claims twenty years ago. We ran our ranches square an' honest; but since Pell has taken 'em over, every cow has had three sets of twins."

"You think that Pell is rustling cattle?"

"We know it," announced Sorrowful Jones. "Me an' Noll found a whole herd on the Lazy Eight marked with down-country brands. We tried to steal a couple of the cows as evidence. Pell's riders caught us red-handed. Pell wanted to shoot us on the spot, but Ike Bandliss convinced him that it'd look better if we was hung. We couldn't prove anything on Pell, 'cause the next day the brands had been changed to Circle C's or Lazy Eights."

"I understand," said Carmack. "Pell wanted those ranches as pasture land for rustled cattle."

"There ain't nothin' we can do," lamented Sorrowful Jones. "We know that Pell's gang steals down-country cattle an' sells 'em up-country. But if we go near Dobietown, we'll be hung sure as shootin'."

"I've got an idea," confided Carmack. "There's only three of us against a crowd of gun-crazy cutthroats. If we strike quickly, however, it may work."

"I'm with you, Dave," said Noll Leslie eagerly.

"Me too," grunted Sorrowful Jones. "If I could get one good crack at Gus Pell, I'd hallelujah from here to heaven!" He squatted on a high rock and gazed morosely over the prairie.

LATE the next night three riders descended the slope of Old Padrino. Carmack's own .45 nestled snugly in his holster. Sorrowful Jones carried the gun which Carmack had taken from Barney Rad. Carmack and Noll Leslie said little; but Sorrowful Jones was strangely talkative.

"So Pell is gonna hang you for shootin' down his foreman?" he remarked in his dull monotone. "Seems to me I heard of this Velasquez; but I disremember where."

"He was a gunman from over the border," Carmack told him. "Only came here recently."

"Mexican, huh?" snorted Jones. "I killed a Mexican once. Seven years ago at San Carlos. It's always weighed on my conscience. I got a terrible conscience."

Carmack snapped his quirt, but said nothing.

"This Mexican," continued Sorrowful, "was the meanest lookin' hombre I ever met. Had black, glittery eyes like a snake. I seen him peekin' over my shoulder at a faro game, an' makin' signals at a gent opposite. So I upped an' shot him in the stomach. Didn't even give him a chance to draw. I can see him yet, wallerin' in his blood!"

"How'd you get out of it?" Carmack asked.

"Wal," said Sorrowful, "I lit a shuck out of town an' raced for the border. Reckon they're still lookin' for me around San Carlos."

"You sure the man was dead?"

Sorrowful Jones lifted his long chin. "When I throw a plum into a man, he's dead 'fore he hits the floor," he exclaimed proudly. "In them days I was bad, savage. But except for that once, I never killed anybody that didn't reach for his cutter first. It was the meanest trick I ever done!"

For the rest of the journey Sorrowful Jones was silent, brooding.

Shortly before midnight the riders reached Dobietown. Around the corner from the town hall, in a clay-walled house, lived Barney Rad. Carmack slid from his horse and pounded on Barney Rad's door. At first there was no answer. Finally Carmack heard a faint, pattering sound.

"He's comin'," said Sorrowful Jones, punching a sharp elbow into Carmack's side. "Stand in front of the door, Noll."

"Who's there?" Carmack detected a frightened quaver in Rad's muffled voice. He and Sorrowful Jones flattened themselves to the wall.

"Noll Leslie," came the weak whispery reply. "Let me in, Barney. I'm hurt. I've been shot."

"You alone?"

"Yes. They killed Sorrowful this morning. So I came back. I knew you was my friend, Barney—"

A key rattled. The door opened a crack. Noll Leslie staggered forward, holding his side.

"So they really got yuh?" gloated Barney Rad, flinging back the door. He was clad in a nightshirt, and a gun barrel nosed over his stubby fingers. "Yuh came to the right place, Noll. 'Cause I'm gonna finish yuh off—"

LIKE a thin serpent, Sorrowful Jones's arm darted out from the side of the doorway. A taloned hand gripped Rad's wrist. At the same time, Carmack leaped from the other direction and smacked his fist on the man's red jowls. The gun clunked against the door sill, and Rad fell backwards with Jones on top of him. His bare feet slapped up and down furiously. Sorrowful Jones smashed his gun butt against Rad's skull. Rad slumped over on his back.

Carmack proceeded to rummage through the bedroom and kitchen. He came back with a length of clothesline in one hand, a ring of keys in the other. "Tie him up," he said to Sorrowful Jones. He tossed the clothesline on Barney Rad's unconscious form. "I'll meet you in fron of the town hall."

"What then?" inquired Noll Leslie.

Carmack paused at the door. "Gus Pell's next on the list," he replied. "Pell can have his choice of making a full confession—or of taking a quick trip to Boothill."

Sorrowful Jones tightened a knot around Barney Rad's thick ankles. "A good idea," he murmured. "Now we're really getting' some place!"

CHAPTER V
Gunman Ghost

A YELLOW light gleamed from the front window of the Circle C ranch house. The three riders tied their horses to the gate by the road and crept cautiously past the barn and corral. A multitude of snores grated through the bunk house window.

"All the cowhands are asleep," observed Sorrowful Jones. "But it looks like Pell is up."

As they approached the hitch rack, Carmack stopped and stared at two horses which were snubbed to the rail. "See that brown pony?" he pointed. "That pony's mine!"

"How could it be?" asked Noll Leslie. "You said you left your horse with Peg."

"I did," replied Carmack. "Wonder how it got here?" The words trailed off to a whisper as the men mounted the low veranda. Carmack peered into the lighted window. The lower pane was up; a faded yellow curtain wisped over the sill. Noll Leslie took one look and reached for the gun in his pocket. Carmack restrained him. "Take it easy," the cowboy whispered. "Let's find out what Pell's up to."

Gus Pell stood in the center of the small parlor, one thumb hooked over his gun belt. Peg Leslie sat on a high-backed armchair in front of him. Chaunce Haines was at Pell's right, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, while Pell twisted the point of his black beard with his little finger and squinted his eyes to narrow slits.

"It'll go hard with you, Peg Leslie," he said, "if you don't tell me where Carmack was headin' for."

"I don't know," the girl snapped angrily.

"We found his horse at your place. He must've told you where he was going."

Peg Leslie glared at him silently.

"I sent a man to fetch Sheriff Bandliss," Pell informed her. "But I was hopin' you'd talk before he got here. Me an' the sheriff can put you in jail for a long time. It's bad business, shieldin' a murderer."

"Don't talk, Miss Leslie," advised Chaunce Haines.

"Keep your neb out of this," growled Pell. "I'll settle accounts with you later!"

"You won't settle nothin'," snapped the old cowman. "I've just found out what's been goin' on here. You've been changin' cattle brands. But lately you haven't even bothered to use a runnin' iron. The last five hundred heads you sent north was slow branded—"

"Shut up!" snarled Pell.

"Not me," Chaunce Haines rapped back. "I'll spread what I know all over the state. How you nearly hung Noll Leslie for rustlin' cattle off his own ranch. An' Dave Carmack. You stole his ranch too. Now you're tryin' to accuse him of murder!"

Purple veins stood out on Pell's temples. "You close that blabby mouth—"

"Listen," Chaunce Haines went on.

"You can't pin anything on Dave Carmack. Why? 'Cause he didn't murder nobody. That snake Velasquez—"

Peg Leslie screamed. A jagged yellow flame cracked from Pell's hip. Chaunce Haines tottered. There was a small red hole in the middle of his forehead. He stood rigid; then slumped to the floor.

IT HAPPENED so unexpectedly that even Carmack did not have time to prevent it. Gun out, the young man ripped aside the curtain and climbed through the window. Pell pivoted, fired. Wood splintered from the casement. Carmack shot low, and Pell sank to one knee, a bullet in his thigh. Two guns were leveled over Carmack's shoulder. Pell saw the glowering faces of Noll Leslie and Sorrowful Jones.

"Don't shoot!" Pell shouted. He dropped his gun and raised both hands to the ceiling. Weakly, he arose to his feet.

"This finishes you, Pell," said Carmack sternly. "You shot Haines down in cold blood. The three of us saw you."

"Yeah," added Sorrowful Jones. "We'd have drilled you in a minute, if we'd known you was gonna kill Chaunce."

"I'll make you a deal," said Pell stubbornly. "You let me go, an' I'll skip out of the country—"

"You'll do that anyway," clipped Carmack. "On the end of a rope."

Peg Leslie was leaning against her father's shoulder. "I'm glad you're safe, Dad," she quavered. "But poor Chaunce! I didn't think that Pell would—"

"Neither did we, Peg," replied Noll Leslie gently. "Chaunce was about to tell something. Something Pell didn't want anyone to hear."

A distant, rasping voice sounded from the corral. "They're some place around here, men!" came the shout. "We've got to find them!"

Sorrowful Jones looked out the window. "It's the sheriff," he growled. "He's wakened all the cowhands. 'Pears like they're comin' toward the house!"

"Reckon you're in for some trouble," sneered Pell, lifting his injured leg painfully. "Sheriff Bandliss is one of my men. He could kill all three of you—an' we could say that Carmack shot Haines. But my offer still holds good. You let me go an' I'll—"

"Stand in front of that window, Pell," Carmack ordered. "You tell Bandliss that we're not here. One wrong word, and I'll curl you like a dry tadpole!"

Pell scowled down the muzzle of Carmack's gun. The young man's brown features had become stony; his gray eyes were cold as polished steel. Pell limped to the window. "Tell the boys to go back to bed, Ike!" he called. "There's no one here!"

"But we found their horses tied by the gate," protested Ike Bandliss. "The ones that Jones and Noll Leslie used to make their escape—and Peg Leslie's pony. I got all the men up to look for 'em."

Pell glanced at Carmack's gun again. "Well—look some place else," he said half-heartedly. "They're not in here." He turned away from the window just as the hall door opened.

"Up with your 'ands, *Señors! Pronto!*"

Carmack heeled, firing as he turned. Pell lunged at his waist instantly, and the shot cracked high. Carmack rolled across the floor, lifted his gun again. Hot lead seared his shoulder. His right arm dropped limply, and he staggered to his feet.

Sorrowful Jones was looking across the room bug-eyed. Noll Leslie had raised his arms. Guns clattered downward. Gus Pell grinned tigerishly as he retrieved the pistols and placed them on the table.

A tall, swarthy man stood by the back hallway, his head partly covered by white bandages. Two six-guns glittered in front of him. The man was Velasquez.

"AGAIN we meet, *Señor* Carmack," purred Velasquez. "But this time you will not be so fortunate.

"So that's what Chaunce Haines was talking about," said Carmack. "He knew that you were alive."

"Your bullet inflicted merely a scalp wound," replied Velasquez. "I recovered several hours later. But *Señor* Pell thought it better that I remain dead."

"I savvy," muttered Carmack. "Pell wanted to hang me for a murder I didn't commit!"

"Quite clever, was it not?" countered Velasquez. "I was to leave the ranch tomorrow, after I was rested. But while sleeping in the back bedroom I heard several shots. It seems that I arrived just in time to—"

"Was you ever in San Carlos?"

Sorrowful Jones growled the question harshly. Velasquez stared at him, and for an instant his guns wobbled. "Who—are you?" he faltered.

"I'm the gent that shot you in the stomach," said Sorrowful Jones. "Seven years ago in San Carlos. Remember?"

"*Si,*" breathed the gunman lowly. "You gave me no chance to draw. Fortunately your shot was wide."

"This greaser's got more lives than a cat," rumbled Sorrowful Jones. "By rights, he's been dead twice. An' here I been worryin' for seven years about shootin' him!"

"You need worry no longer," Velasquez said. His lips became a thin crease. He lifted the gun in his left hand and sighted it at Sorrowful Jones's head.

Dave Carmack jumped forward and smashed the table lamp to the floor. Two shots spurted from Velasquez's guns as the room crashed into darkness. Sorrowful Jones uttered a curse and leaped straight for the line of fire. A bullet whizzed past his ear. Another bit into his coat sleeve, but he kept going until he reached the far wall. Lashing through the darkness with his fist, he struck Velasquez on the cheek. The Mexican fired again, and Jones swooped low, knocking him off his feet. Velasquez plumped down in the hallway. Sorrowful Jones grabbed for the two guns. One slashing muzzle clipped his ear. He caught the other gun; wrenched it from Velasquez's hand. It kicked back, whanging a streamer of fire into the hall door. Clawing at the door handle, Velasquez scrambled down the hallway on his hands and knees, Sorrowful Jones plunged after him, and both men scuttled toward the rear of the house.

IN THE meantime, Noll Leslie had kept Pell from escaping through the window. With a savage, animal-like movement, Pell struck the old man in the face. Leslie crumpled backwards. Pell lifted his gun to fire; but Dave Carmack hurtled across the room and slammed him with a stinging left hook.

Pell angled his gun at Carmack's head. Dave saw it glitter in the moonlight, ducked low and rifled his left fist into Pell's stomach. Pell's injured leg gave way, and he flopped to his haunches, dragging Carmack with him. The gun swerved up again, brushing Carmack's temple.

A slim, tousle-haired figure leaped from the darkness. It was Peg Leslie, and she threw all her weight on Pell's gun arm. Pell yanked the trigger, and a flare of flame zipped past her face. In another instant firm, white teeth dug into Gus Pell's corded wrist. Carmack thudded a right cross at Pell's chin, knocking his shoulder blades against the floor. The bearded giant screamed profanity.

In desperation, Pell loosed his hold on the gun. Peg Leslie pounced on it instantly. Before she could pick it up, Pell raised himself from the floor and wrapped his great arms about Carmack's wrist. With a mighty heave, he staggered to his feet and hurled Carmack bodily across the room.

Carmack landed near the front door. His wounded shoulder throbbed, burned. He struggled to get up, but Gus Pell climbed on his back like a mad grizzly. Pell was massive, heavy, strong—stronger than Carmack had first imagined. His fingers clamped Carmack's neck ruthlessly, and his fingernails gouged into the cowboy's throat. Carmack saw little white circles wheeling through the darkness.

He could hear Peg Leslie calling to him. Shots banged from the front window. Outside, men were shouting. And over all, guns were blasting wildly.

Then Gus Pell leaned sidewards to gain more leverage. His elbow dug sharply into Carmack's injured shoulder. It felt like a hot iron driven into an open sore. Carmack's body tightened with pain—intense, driving pain. The sudden agony gave Carmack new strength.

Pressing his palms to the floor, Carmack twisted his body, flinging Pell from his back. Pell's grip on his throat loosened. Carmack tore the fingers away, rolled like a wounded, threshing shark and kicked Pell in the chest. Pell lurched against the front wall; climbed to his feet. Carmack was up istantly throwing swift punches at his enemy's head.

Peg Leslie looked out the window and saw Sheriff Ike Bandliss coming toward the house, a band of Mexican cowhands at his back. Lifting Pell's gun she fired across the sill.

Ike Bandliss turned and ran. His men scuttled for shelter. Peg Leslie's shots were wild, but they kept Bandliss and his men at a distance. After firing the few bullets left in Pell's gun, the girl crawled to the overturned table and recovered the weapon which Carmack had dropped on the floor. Noll Leslie sat up, felt his bruised jaw. Without a word he took a revolver from the girl's hand and sprayed a line of fire out the open window. An answering hail of lead shrieked over the pock-marked sill.

Then, from behind the water trough, Ike Bandliss saw a shadowy form appear at the window. Guns blazed and Gus Pell, who had broken away from Carmack, jerked grotesquely. Holding his forearms across his stomach, he tripped out the door and slid stomach first to the ground.

Every gun was silent. Ike Bandliss's shrill voice knifed the air. "You've shot Pell! You've killed the wrong man!"

The Mexicans broke into a confused babble. Guns slid into holsters, and the men ran for the bunk house. Someone would have to pay for this. But not they. Let *Señor* Bandliss take the blame!

Ike Bandliss emerged from his shelter and dashed for the corral. His horse was tied to the wing fence. From the ranch house a gun blasted. Bandliss leaped like a jackrabbit and plumped sideways into the dust, and old Noll Leslie lowered a gun. "Got him on the run," he grunted.

CARMACK'S hand shook as he picked up the fallen lamp and touched a match to the wick. "You all right, Peggy?" he asked, placing the lamp on a chair.

"O. K.," said Noll Leslie, helping Peg from the floor. The girl seemed bewildered, dazed. "You'd better find out what's happened to Sorrowful," she said weakly. "He went down the hall after Velasquez—"

Carmack wiped a red smear from his face and tottered to the hall door. He discovered Sorrowful Jones sitting with his back to the wall, his

dour face lighted by a wistful smile. Carmack tried to lift the man's lanky body from the floor. "Can you get up, Sorrowful?" he asked concernedly.

"Nope," came the quiet reply. "I got too much lead in me."

"Where's Velasquez?"

"In the kitchen," answered Sorrowful Jones. "I just killed him for the third time. But I reckon my conscience won't bother me no more. This time it was self defense!"

WHEN Barney Rad's Indian housekeeper arrived to cook breakfast, she found her employer trussed with ropes on the front room floor. Barney Rad was choked up with anger. Cursing, raging, he put on his clothes and stalked around the corner to the town hall. He intended to find Ike Bandliss, gather a posse and string Dave Carmack to the highest tree in Greenbush county.

The town hall door was locked. Evidently Sheriff Bandliss had not arrived yet. Barney Rad fumbled in his pocket. His keys were missing.

"Maybe you could use these?"

Rad revolved on one heel. Dave Carmack stood behind him, dangling a bunch of keys on a ring. Peg Leslie was at Carmack's side. Barney Rad narrowed his small eyes, started to mouth an oath. Carmack tossed the keys at his face. "Open up," said Carmack. "We want to file a claim."

Barney Rad eyed the gun at Carmack's belt. Grumbling, he turned a key in the lock. Carmack and the girl followed him down the musty hall to the room marked "County Recorder."

"We want to file a claim on two ranches," stated Carmack. "The Circle C and Lazy Eight."

"Yuh know Gus Pell owns that land," Rad scowled.

"Show me the claim," said Carmack.

Rad fumbled through a filing cabinet. His bulby nose wrinkled perplexedly. He pawed the cabinet again. "It ain't here!" he exclaimed. "Yuh stole it! Last night yuh took my keys, came here an' tore up Pell's claim!"

"Maybe so," admitted Carmack. "This county ought to take better care of its records."

"I don't believe Pell ever had a claim," said Peg Leslie.

"Yes, he did," answered Carmack. "He and Rad and Ike Bandliss were in partnership. Rad destroyed the first claims—the ones belonging to my dad and Noll Leslie. Pell then filed a claim on both ranches, and Sheriff Bandliss made the whole thing seem legal by evicting Noll Leslie and selling the cattle at auction."

"I guess Pell will have somethin' to say about this!" fumed Barney.

"Gus Pell is dead," Carmack told him. "Ike Bandliss died this morning; but he had time to confess everything: how you all framed Noll Leslie and tried to do the same to me."

"Is the prisoner ready yet?" Sorrowful Jones appeared at the door, leaning on a long, pinewood cane. A shiny badge gleamed on his stained vest.

"Meet Sheriff Jones," said Carmack. "He was appointed early this morning by the county board. He'll act until next election."

Barney Rad seemed to shrivel in his clothes. "I might of known it wouldn't work," he mumbled. "But Pell said we could make a lot of money. Said it'd be safe—"

"How about filing those claims?" Carmack insisted. "Noll Leslie is going to quit ranching, so you can put both outfits under my name."

"*Your* name?" questioned Rad. "What about the gal? The Lazy Eight belongs to—"

"I'm taking it over," said Carmack tersely.

"That ain't all you're takin' over," added Sorrowful Jones. "I know. I been married four times." He gave Peg Leslie a solemn wink.

On Proving Ground

By

ANDREW A. CAFFREY

Author of "Stock Shots," "Good Crash Pilot," etc.

ASK ANYBODY in military service what a proving ground is and he'll tell you—"Just that: a proving ground. A place where military equipment—guns, shot and shell, trucks and tanks, planes and balloons, or what have you—is tried out."

Guess that's a good-enough definition. However, Lieutenant Tom Teel goes all the way when he tells you what a proving ground really is—or can be. Or better, has been. That is, what it has been for Tom Teel.

"A proving ground," claims Teel, "is a place where hundreds of brainy guys in comfortable offices make bums out of a few brawny guys in cramped, damned uncomfortable cockpits. And yours truly is one of the brawny boys in question. Just a willing gent with a strong back and a weak mind. But I'm getting wise. I'm all set to quit."

Set to quit? Tom Teel had been all set to quit for as far back as any of his friends could recall. However, Tom was in a good position to define proving ground, for he had been flying test at Federal Proving Ground longer than any other of Uncle Sam's good-and-willing airmen. Truth is, Lieutenant Tom Teel had served three assignments, running consecutively, whereas the average army pilot is appointed only for a single, brief tour of such dangerous duty. And many there were who wondered just why Tom Teel seemed to have a permanent lien on that job.

They Say That Parachutes Were Invented for Test-Flight Observers

"It's because the chief of Air Corps knows I'm tops," Tom Teel told his fellow officers, when they kidded or questioned him.

But "Loose Lip" Lock, Teel's favorite test-line mechanic, whispered something else again. And what Loose Lip whispered was entirely off the record.

"This man Teel," said he, "isn't just another loused-up test hopper. Hell no! He's a Department of Justice plant. The D. of J. has these guys on every government post. I can tell 'em as far as I can see 'em. Teel's aces with me—understand?—but he's a dick just the same. He's here to check up on the aircraft jobbers that dump junk on your old Uncle Sam. And I get it pretty straight that he's after one baby in particular. Yeah, you're right—Zanuck."

P. E. Zanuck, strange builder of stranger aircraft, had been having all sorts of fine luck with Uncle Sam's Air Corps. He had been shoving ships through Federal Proving Ground with a strange regularity that was astounding, to say the least. Getting O.K.'s on aircraft that weren't air craft at all. Selling man-killing ships that, once put in regular service, became outmoded in no time. And that was hard to understand. But so was P. E. Zanuck.

Zanuck, designer as well as builder and seller, had just arrived with a new observation-pursuit job, all set for quick tests and acceptance, at about the time Tom Teel announced that he was all washed up—wised up and set to quit. Getting a look at the new Zanuck ship, as soon as it was uncrated and assembled out in flying section's big hangar, Tom Teel seemed to take a new interest in life. Not, however, that the new Zanuck job was anything over which a good airman might get excited.

THIS new Zanuck product was an all metal job. It was a single motored, high-wing monoplane. And Loose Lip Lock, talking to Tom Teel and all others in that assembly hangar, had something to say about that—"A high-wing job! What does this guy Zanuck think he's peddling here! Who t'hell does he think will put this crate—with its high wing—through dive tests? Say-y-y, wait till I see Zanuck. I'll talk turkey to that bird."

And, believe it or not, Loose Lip was the boy who'd talk turkey with Designer-builder-seller Zanuck or anybody else. Loose Lip was one of those free-and-easy, hard to squelch individuals that know no social or status barriers. He'd talk business with the post commanding officer or with the dog-robber of the commanding officer. And as for P. E. Zanuck—Loose Lip always took that gentleman into camp as soon as said gentleman showed his face on the test line. It seemed to be one of Loose Lip's sworn duties, that thing of telling Zanuck what was wrong with Zanuck ships.

"Will I tell him!" Loose Lip would say. "Will I talk to a designer-builder-seller! 'Course I will. I'm not proud. Not even if my forefathers did come over, steerage, on the Mayflower. Now, if any of you guys say that my great-great-great-grandfather would never've got ashore off the Mayflower if the rat guards were on the hawsers, you're a liar."

Anyway, P. E. Zanuck showed up at Federal Proving Ground before the new ship was ready for its first test hop. And he stood there in the big assembly hangar, among pilots, mechanics and other experts, watching final adjustments put to his new masterpiece.

In came Loose Lip and stood beside him—beside Zanuck; and that was more deadly than the spider that came along and sat beside her. Somehow or other, common sense had long since told Zanuck that he didn't have to take this from an ordinary mac. But, on the other hand, what could he do about it? And was this Loose Lip guy, so close to Tester Teel, just an ordinary mac?

"Say, Zan," said Loose Lip, "this here

funny looking, new mock-up of yours sure looks like something that no self-respecting cat would dare drag in. What are you trying to unload on Uncle Sam—another French gift? Look here. Let an expert show you a few things that's all wrong with this bus."

"Say, said Zanuck, getting plenty hot under the collar, "are you going to fly this ship?"

"So that's the way you boil over on a buddy," said Loose Lip. "Well, now that you've asked me—no. No, I'm not hopping here. But on the other hand, are you going to fly her? Are you or any other designer-builder-seller going to go up in your own ships? Well, now, there's an idea—perhaps you are. Who knows, and who can tell?"

"I'd suggest that you pipe down, mechanic," Zanuck then snapped. "Any more advice from you and I'll take steps to have you removed from test. Better than that" —and now Zanuck was mad enough to spread himself all over Proving Ground— "I'll see what can be done about having you ousted, entirely, from this field. I'll get rid of you, for good and all!" And by then P. E. Zanuck was yelling. But Zanuck failed to rid Federal Proving Ground of Loose Lip; and that, in the end, was to prove a great mistake on his part.

WELL, a day or two of this and that went by, then the new Zanuck ship was pushed out to the deadline for motor tests. The motor runs went off O.K. The ship, so the experts said, was all ready to do it. Nothing to do now but notify flying section that the job was in their hands. Nothing then for flying section to do but send out one of its test pilots accompanied by the test-flight observer whose job it was to hold down rear seats of new ships and watch what happened. And what a nice job that could turn out to be! They say that parachutes were invented for test-flight observers.

When that call went up to the chief's of flight section office, Tom Teel happened to be the only test pilot in the room.

"That new Zanuck job is set to go, Tom," Captain Call, in charge of flight section, said. "You sit here and answer the phone. I'll take this ship up and twist its tail a bit."

"Me—I hate telephones," said Tom Teel. "And since when has test hopping become the job of the chief of section? Don't answer, my fine superior officer. I'll tell you—you think that maybe your testers shouldn't be called upon to fly Zanuck jobs. And your testers agree. But they've got to be flown; and that's my job. No guy ever robbed in on any job of mine. Anyway, no job of flying ever got me down. So I'll trot out and look this one over."

Captain Call drummed on his desk. "Just a shake," he then said, "there isn't an observer on the post. Two sick, two in the air, and Joe Crane in the hospital. So what?"

"I wasn't going to ride an observer on this first hop," Tom Teel answered.

"Good," said the chief. "But see to it that you have a sand bag in that rear pit. She looks like a job that might be plenty nose heavy if a feller's to fly her solo."

"Sand bag me eye, sir," said Tom Teel. "I'll have live weight in that rear pit."

"How d'ya mean that, feller?" questioned the chief. "Not that Loose Lip gent that I've warned to stay on the ground

and do a bit of work? Listen, Tom—old Loose Lip is a civilian employee. He has, as you well know, no air status. He has no right off the ground; and we can't have him hopping here and there with you."

"Not a chance!" said Tom Teel. "You couldn't bribe old wise-head Loose Lip to hop a Zanuck job. Not even with the great Tom Teel on the controls. But that doesn't say that old Loose Lip can't see to it that this Zanuck ship gets a swell passenger."

"Oh-o! Not Zanuck, in person?" said the chief.

"None other," said Teel, lowering his voice and tiptoeing all around that office, right across the chief's desktop, then to the door. "Designer-builder-peddler guys don't very often ride in airyplanes, as you know, but this Zanuck bird is——"

"Use your head, Tom! Snap out of the dramatic pose. Wise up, feller! Zanuck is a non-flyer, and——"

"And—pardon the interruption, chief—we air guys have a right to be non-diers. Zanuck doesn't pay much attention to that fact. And it is a fact. So, just leave this little party to me, chief, and I'll give you boys in the back room something to tell your kids about. You know, it's just about time that we pilots did one or two little things for us pilots. Hell, man, we like sunshine and flowers—flowers where you see the blossoms, not the roots! We've got a right to live."

Tom Teel then booted his way down out of flight section's loft office, strapping into his chute's harness as he went. Out in front of the big assembly hangar there was a large gathering, just about all of Federal Proving Ground's three thousand army and civilian employees, men and women. This assembly, from shops and offices, was the usual thing when a new model ship was about to be flown on its first hop. And the first of all that gang to step out and greet Tom Teel was his good friend Loose Lip.

"What!" snapped Loose Lip. "Are you the gent picked to hop this job?" Then, under his breath—"Just as though I didn't know, eh?" Then loud again, so's all might hear, "Man! you must be cuckoo! Well, I'll be a ——"

"Zanuck says you are," said Teel. "But keep your eye on the little bird, Loose Lip. Are all these boys and girls going to see some fun, what? Oh, by the way, Loose Lip—dig up another parachute for me, will you? Put the chute in the back pit of this new bus."

"I wouldn't furnish a chute for that guy," Loose Lip mumbled. "But, of course, if you insist who am I to question your poor judgment."

AFTER that, for a little while, Tom Teel stood out there on the cement apron afront the big hangar and swapped air talk with Zanuck and the men of the engineering division. The new ship's motor was already turning out there on the deadline. Mechanics were swarmed about her, on top of her, under her, and in her two cockpits. Everything had to be as shipshape as Federal Proving Ground could make it; and those last checkups were just about complete. So there was nothing much now delaying the grand bow, that first important takeoff. A takeoff with some three thousand pair of anxious eyes upon it. That could sure be a big moment.

Tom Teel, strolling toward the ship, asked, "Has this bus been taxied on the field yet?"

"Taxied!" Zanuck said. "This is a flying ship, Teel. We won't worry ourselves about its grass-cutting abilities."

"Sez you, Mr. Zanuck!" exclaimed Tom Teel, trying to put a whole lot of importance into the matter. "A ship's ground work, its handling under power and rudder, is the first essential. A bus must roll right, before it can be expected to get off the ground and fly right. Yes, sir; it's highly important. So just jump in the back pit, Mr. Zanuck, and we'll see how

your new product acts under power. I want you to see for yourself. There's been a lot of talk, mostly all bad, about this ship. So we want her right. Come on, let's go."

"All right, Teel," Zanuck finally agreed. "But just on the ground. As you know, I don't—— That is, my insurance policies forbid flying."

As he argued, Zanuck was climbing aboard the rear pit of his new ship. And off at the edge of the watching crowd, right where the girl stenogs of Federal Proving Ground were clustered thickest, Loose Lip Lock seemed to be leading a cheering section that ran very strongly to laughter. All that loud laughter, you might guess, was at Mr. Zanuck's expense.

Anyway, Tom Teel and Zanuck were all set. And for several minutes after that, with a wild-eyed designer-builder-seller in that rear pit, Tom Teel taxied up and down the field's runway. Well, the expert observers behind the deadline could see that the new bus was not handling any too well on the ground. Time and again, Tom Teel had to fight 'er like the devil, avoiding ground loops. It took lots of power, plenty of rudder fanning, and even stick, to put and keep that crate on anything resembling a straight course.

In the end, after he'd horsed that ship all over the big lot, Teel swung the nose back into the wind, away down at the far end of the takeoff runway. He seemed all set to do it—to take off.

THE ship's motor was revving silently, just barely turning over. And Federal Proving Ground, with all those waiting watchers, was as silent as the grave. Therefore, when he did so, you could hear Zanuck yell, "Just a moment, Teel! Just a moment! What are you going to do—take 'er off?"

Zanuck was standing in that rear pit. The man and his high voice were full of stark fear.

"Hold everything, Mr. Zanuck!" Pilot Tom Teel could be heard yelling back at his passenger. "Sit down! I'm just going to put the power to her, get the tail up off the ground, and see how she acts then. Hold, 'er, Newt!"

But Zanuck's name wasn't Newt, but he seemed to be very willing to hold 'er. He was holding his hat, holding the ship's cowling, holding everything he could reach. He was still yelling, too. But he was sitting down, or, at least, going down.

The sound of that ship's single motor was no longer low and clicking. Instead, it was at full gun and the mighty roar shook the very air of Federal Proving Ground. And the ship had wiggled a bit. The tail came up off the ground. Teel fanned his rudder. Then the ground-pack had made up under those wings, and the glistening, all-metal product was gathering good ground speed. A bit faster, and she was in mid field, halfway of the takeoff strip. Then a crazy, funny bounce—and Teel had bootstrapped that Zanuck puzzle off the ground. During those first few seconds of actual flight the new ship seemed to stagger and stall. Seemed to act foolish. But Teel held her to the easy climb. You could see Teel watching this and that; and those on the ground, closest to him and his work, had some idea what he was thinking.

However, nobody could guess what Zanuck thought just then.

So the Zanuck ship won altitude; and that test hop, such as it was, went right along under the able hands and feet of Pilot Tom Teel. Soon the ship was at about five thousand feet, in a fine, clear sky. Then the experts held their breath as Teel leveled out of his climb and went to maneuvering. It was something to watch. Again, that bus acted goofy, staggered and stalled all over the sky. But, of course, only expert eyes could detect that fact from the ground. To the bulk of Federal Proving Ground's watchers it was just another new job in pretty flight. All flight's pretty to those who don't know

just how sour a piece of air work can really be.

Obvious to the experts—such as the now-silent Loose Lip Lock—Tom Teel was feeling out every move he made with that ship. He banked her with all the caution in the world, making each of those turns under sure, steady power; for he wasn't going to let that bus drop her nose and start sliding out from under him. Never, not for a shake, did he let that nose get too low. Boy, a pilot can't always get noses up, once they drop!

However, there was nothing really startling attempted; and after each and every turn, dip or small zoom, Teel seemed to take lots of time to redress his ship's flight. Then you'd see him looking fore and aft, right and left, up and down, all over that bus, making sure that said bus was still there—all in one piece. And during those tame maneuvers you could tell, even from the ground, that there was no snap there, no flying pep, no air class at all.

Well, Tom Teel must have known one of the thrills of his flying life when he pulled his next maneuver. All of a sudden, out of a straight-ahead, horizontal line of flight, the nose of that ship dropped and the new bus was in a power dive. Dove of its own accord and entirely without warning. A ship has to be plenty bad to go out of hand like that. No, that dive wasn't on Tom Teel's program. And three thousand watchers down on Federal Proving Ground could see that it wasn't.

QUICKLY, habitually, Tom Teel had throttled the motor—as soon as that dive got under way—and the wild, humping jerks of the ship's plunging drop plainly showed that he was doing everything in his power to fight the crazy craft back to level flight.

Through a full thousand feet of hard dive that plunging, whistling mass of wings, wires, braces and fuselage filled the sky with a mighty noise, then, as a last resort, Teel kicked on full rudder and rolled the ship spirally out of the set groove into which the faulty aerodynamics of its construction had sent it. Seconds later, with a new-sounding swish of wires, stays and surfaces, that bus came out of the dive. Federal Proving Ground was able to look around and smile again; for it knew that one of its best and bravest had missed death by minutes. And away up there in the sky, Tom Teel must have known that grand and glorious feeling that comes not more than a few times to any man. But the new Zanuck ship had lost all of two thousand feet of altitude in less time than is good for any pilot or ship—or unwilling passenger. And what a nice first ride that was for Zanuck!

Safely out of that dive, Teel climbed his ship, steadily, to regain lost altitude. To regain what had been lost, and a little more; for what had happened once, to such a ship, might happen again.

Experts watching from the ground all agreed that Tom Teel had his hands full of ship. "That dive," they all agreed, "isn't the kind that goes with unknown ships, not much."

So Tom Teel regained his former five thousand elevation. Then, playing it plenty safe, he went up to ten thousand. He flew it there for a few minutes, then the crowd watched him go all the way up to fifteen. And even Federal Proving Ground wondered at such an altitude as that. After a lot of mighty careful maneuvering, at that great ceiling, the new ship flew off to the east and was soon lost from view at Federal Proving Ground. And all those watchers wondered some more.

Fully an hour later, Tom Teel telephoned in from one of the outlying emergency landing fields. That spot is about eight miles from the proving ground. It is a big piece of open acreage, giving a landing ship several square miles of flat country at which to aim.

"Zanuck and I are safe," Teel reported. "The ship? It isn't a ship any more. Yeh,

she's washed out. Also burned up. It's off the books. Nothing left. Not even the number on her fuselage. Good? I'll say that's good. You'll never know how good.

"You want to know what happened, eh? Man, don't start me laughing! Didn't you people see that dive? Oh, you did, eh?

"Well, the only thing that brought her out of that was a quick prayer. No, sir, I don't rate any credit for it.

"Anyway, when that nose did come up, and I got her climbing again, I began to look around. You know me—old curiosity Teel. Well, all through the fuselage, and along the wing, rivets by the holy handfuls had pulled and were popping out. What was even more to the point, my aileron control had jammed and the wing fittings must have drifted, because something was out of whack and the ship had gone so nose heavy that I knew I could never cut my gun and set her down for a safe landing. Of course, with full motor, she'd still fly level. And did I fly her!

"What? The tail? Yeh, they're right—there never was any control on that tail. Not even when the ship was all in one piece, at the start. Guess the wide wing deflected the prop blast, and that, by the way, was what cooked Zanuck.

"Who—oh, he's all jake. But the gent sure had an awful experience. Yes, friend Zanuck is all jake now. You see, when I pushed the old wreck up to about fifteen thousand feet, I turned to tell Zanuck to jump. I had given up all hope of landing back there at Federal, or even over here at the emergency. But when I turned to look at Zanuck, he wasn't there. Imagine my chagrin!

"I thought it over for a few seconds. He must be there, I told myself. So I bent down and looked back alongside my seat, and under the cowl. Sure enough, Zanuck was there—on the floor of his pit. He was cold to the world. Out with his mouth open. And I wondered why.

"Then, with my own snout low in the cockpit, I got a whiff of something bad—exhaust gasses, or I don't know my air onions. I retarded my spark and shot back a blast of rich smoke. Then I watched that smoke eddy and loaf under the wide wing. Next, through deflection, the gasses went

down into Zanuck's cockpit. And, by gosh, I had to laugh. And who wouldn't? The great inventor's own ship had turned Frankenstein—got its own maker.

"BUT it was a horse on me, too. So I curtailed my own merriment and gave over a few tight seconds to intense thought. The answer came quick. There was nothing to do but toss Zanuck overside. And wasn't that A-B-C simple, with him out cold and flopped on the floor with his unbelted chute right where Loose Lip had thrown it? Well, there was nothing to do but do it. A long time ago I saw Major Kerby step from one cockpit to another while in flight. And I always told myself that a lieutenant could do that if a major had. So there was my next little job all set up for me to knock down.

"And I went to it like a little man, if I do say so. First I set the throttle in a position where the ship was on the point of going into a glide. Next, pulling a lace from one of my boots, I tied the control stick in neutral, clamped that removed boot under the rudder bar till it wouldn't move one way or the other, and I was set. The ship flew jake enough, hands and feet off. I moved plenty fast after that.

"With my parachute feeling like a ton of brick, I stood up in the slipstream and stretched a foot over the hump of the cowl and into Zanuck's pit. Putting everything on the ball, I then went after that foot. Man, that called for bravery, what I mean!

"THE second the ship noticed that my weight had moved back, she came out of her easy glide and shoved her nose up—the fool wanted to climb. That meant that speed was the most important thing in what was left of a short life, because, if that old crate wanted to, she might take it into her head to fly a loop. She was a very tricky lady.

"I jerked Zanuck into a sitting position right there on his chute pack, then strapped him into the harness. That wasn't so easy, either. First, I had to locate and untangle the different belts, and they were all in a mess from him sitting on them. But the job was finally finished, and I boosted Zanuck—headfirst—onto the cockpit's gunwale. Everything looked jake, so I pulled the ring and heaved him into space, free of the ship. And a pretty job it was, too.

"What a fall was there! Kid Zanuck went through a full thousand feet of drop before that white flower blossomed. Then, when she snapped him right side up, he floated far astern on his white wings of romance, still fast asleep. I was sure proud of myself. That's what I call painless chute jumping. Would that some kind soul had done as much by me!

"Even with that ship going to pieces under me, I hesitated to jump from her. 'Try to land it!' the great inner voice kept saying. 'The hereafter is full of ex-chute jumpers and there's no glory for newcomers. Try and land it! Get back on your controls and give it another whirl. What kind of an airman are you?'

"That great inner voice was winning out, and I was all set to climb back to the front cockpit when something else again stepped into the reckoning. What was it, you ask? I'll give you the three regulation guesses.

"Right—the first guess. The ship caught fire.

"Yeh, that's it—the gasoline line had been vibrated loose in the dive and, all of a sudden now, she went to spraying fuel all over the hot motor. I'll say I went away from there! Jumped!

"Well, that just about gives you the whole picture. Zanuck landed a few miles north of here; and a farmer just drove him in. He says that he regained consciousness at about five thousand elevation and thought he must be in heaven—'cause there was no Loose Lip guy on hand razzin' him.

"Me? Oh, I'm jake. I'll be back to Federal in a shake. The gang here are pushing out a ship for me now. No, Zanuck won't ride back with me. Fact is, Zanuck has sorta promised me that he won't be back at Federal Proving Ground at all. Yes, that's right, we've had quite a little talk. You might tell Loose Lip that. He'll want to hear about it. Zanuck, you know, was going to have Loose Lip fired. Well, I'll be seeing ya."

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